South Haven
Tribune

$3

August 31, 2025

A monarch butterfly is pictured earlier this summer in St. Joseph.
Don Campbell / HP staff

Protecting pollinators

Efforts underway by road agencies to save the monarch butterfly

By JULIE SWIDWA
For the Tribune

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

As the monarch butterfly becomes a threatened species, the Van Buren County Road Commission is changing some of its countywide mowing guidelines.

As the monarch butterfly is set to become a threatened species, local counties and cities are focusing on responses and solutions.

In late 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its intent to provide protection for the monarch as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

So, by this December, USFWS permission will be required for every state, federal and local-funded activity in road right-of ways, which can be home to milkweed, the monarch's most preferred food source.

According to the County Road Association of Michigan, this means county road agencies could face delays for road projects. The CRA has launched a voluntary Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) that allows road agencies to continue business as usual.

In a CCAA, county road agencies commit to "adopt" or protect a specified amount of right-of ways, by enrolling their county in the program.

The Van Buren County Road Commission has joined the statewide initiative to protect monarch butterflies by allowing milkweed and other native plants to grow along county road right-of-ways.

"We passed a resolution at our board meeting this month and joined, for lack of a better word, the consortium with the County Road Association," Road Commission Managing Director Bret Witkowski said this week. "Basically, the last three feet of the right-of-way we would not mow, which we don't really now anyways and allow that to be for the milkweed – for the butterflies."

Witkowski said many people have already informed them of some milkweed growing close to the road.

He said if this happens, residents can put some stakes with string around the plants and call the road commission to let them know where it is and they will mow around the plants as well.

"Traditionally we don't go all the way out, (it's) not necessarily needed to go that far so, (to) allow them to have the last three feet or 5 percent of the right-of-way, that's not a problem for us," Witkowski said.

The road commission mows from March through November throughout Van Buren County.

"We have 1,300 miles and you have to do both sides," Witkowski said. "So, we have to mow 2,600 miles of roads, which is like going to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and back."

Monarchs and milkweed

Berrien County Road Department Director Mark Heyliger said the outer three feet of a right-of-way is now considered "adopted," and should not be mowed to ensure a monarch habitat is allowed to blossom. He said counties that opt out of the CCAA will be required to get clearance from every project and right-of way activity.

Heyliger said the typical rural right-of-way is 66 feet, 33 feet on each side of the road. He said the outer three feet is furthest from the road. Counties that join the CCAA program will not need project-by-project USFWS review. The CRA will handle all applications, monitoring of milkweed and required paperwork. Fees vary depending on the number of county roads, and for Berrien County, the fee will range from $1,200 to $4,000 per year.

The Berrien County Board of Commissioners recently approved the CCAA agreement with the County Road Association of Michigan. Heyliger said without that approval, there would be burdensome right-of way restrictions and the road department would likely face delays in road projects and undefined requirements to create milkweed mitigation measures for all activities.

The county board's action came on a resolution forwarded to the board by its Administration Committee. Committee Chairman Jim Curran said by agreeing to do this, Berrien County can continue to improve and maintain the countywide network of roads without seeking permission

See **MONARCH**, page A3

Beach monitoring to end after Labor Day

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven recently announced that active beach monitoring will end after the Labor Day holiday.

According to a news release, starting Sept. 2 the city will no longer monitor swimming conditions and raise beach safety flags as part of its Beach Safety and Flag Program.

The life ring cabinets, life rings and throw bags will remain on the city's piers throughout the fall and winter seasons. These safety devices will continue to be regularly inspected to ensure they are available, secure and in proper working condition.

"Now that school is back in session, the temperatures are dropping and days are getting shorter, we are seeing a sharp decline in visitors to our beaches," Beach Safety and Facilities Superintendent Matthew Dey said in the release. "Like so many other employers, we also find ourselves with limited staffing now that so many members of our seasonal team have returned to the classroom.

"With both of these factors in mind, we've made the decision to end active beach monitoring starting Sept. 2. The city extends its appreciation to residents, visitors and staff for contributing to another safe and successful beach season."

For more information, go to the City of South Haven website at www.southhavemi.gov.

For questions, contact at Dey at 269-637-0724.

South Haven speakers series to explore immigration impact

By TRIBUNE STAFF

THRONSON

SOUTH HAVEN — What happens to families caught in the crossfire of immigration law?

On Sept. 11, the South Haven Speakers Series will host Professor David Thronson of Michigan State University College of Law as he discusses the impact of immigration laws on families.

According to a news release, the program will take place at 7 p.m. at Lake Michigan College's South Haven Campus.

A leading expert on family law and immigration, Thronson will explore how shifting U.S. immigration policies and practices impact vulnerable children and families, raising both legal and humanitarian questions.

"Professor Thronson will address how changes in immigration law directly affect families, the legal complexities of family separation, and the humanitarian considerations that should guide policy decisions," Speakers' Series Board Member Dana Hullinger said in the release.

From 2019 to 2024, Thronson served as the director of the Talsky Center for Human Rights and the Alan S. Zekelman Professor of International Human Rights Law.

"His research focuses on the intersection of family law and immigration law, with particular emphasis on the vulnerabilities faced by children in immigration proceedings," the release stated. "He is widely recognized for his scholarship, teaching and advocacy on behalf of immigrant families."

A wine-and-cheese reception will be held at 6:30 p.m. followed by the presentation at 7 p.m.

Admission is $10 and students attend free of charge.

The South Haven Speakers Series is a nonprofit, where about three quarters of the series budget comes from donors.

For more information, go to www.southhavenspeakerseries.org.

Vintage engine, tractor show returns to SH for 42nd year

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Flywheelers Museum's 42nd annual Antique Engine and Tractor Show will begin on Sept. 4 and feature collectors displaying a wide assortment of old farm machinery from huge steam traction engines to vintage tractors.

According to a news release, the four-day event will be filled with parades, entertainment, kids activities, demonstrations and hundreds of old tractors.

"Last year, our exhibitors brought over 800 pieces of equipment," Museum President Patrick Ingalls said in the release. "This year, we expect to reach that number as well."

The event will have a variety of activities including a large outdoor flea market, working displays at the sawmill, shingle mill and blacksmith shop, tractor pulls, the Thing-A-Ma-Jig parade and consignment auction.

"We have a full schedule of activities," Ingalls said in the release. "We pride ourselves on making this a family-friendly event with plenty of things to do for the kids as well."

Saturday is considered

See **FLYWHEELERS**, page A3

Photo provided

The Michigan Flywheelers Museum's 42nd annual Antique Engine and Tractor Show will feature a wide assortment of old farm machinery from huge steam traction engines to vintage tractors.

The Tribune:
Celebrating
Our 126th Year

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OBITUARY

John Urist

Jan. 16, 1949 – Aug. 21, 2025

Haribol! John M. Urist (Krishna Balaram Das), 76 of Honolulu, Hawaii, left his body on Aug. 21 at Queens Medical Center in Honolulu.

He was a graduate of L.C.Mohr High School in South Haven, Mich. and Thomas Jefferson College (Grand Valley State College) in Allendale, Mich.

John had a kind sweet spirit and was a lifelong creator of art.

He journeyed to Hawaii in the late 70's and fell in love with the Aloha spirit. John found Krishna Consciousness shortly after and was a devotee at the Honolulu ISKCON temple for many years.

He was predeceased by his father Martin Urist, mother Pearl Urist, sister Barbara Dakin and brother Stewart Urist.

He is survived by his loving brother George (MJ) of Tully, N.Y., four nephews, four nieces, three great nephews and three great nieces.

A private ceremony is planned for October in Honolulu. Donations in his memory can be made to ISKCON Hawaii or a charity of your choosing.

Hare Krishna.

Youth Development Company to unveil new playground

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Youth Development Company and Caring Connections recently announced the grand opening of its newly expanded natural playground.

According to a news release, the playground reveal will take place at 5 p.m. on Sept. 10.

This nature-inspired, inclusive play space – located behind the Youth Development Company Learning Center at 1635 76th Street – invites children to explore, imagine and connect through play and seniors to enjoy the peace an outdoor space can provide.

"Play is the beginning of something extraordinary," CEO of Caring Connections Robin McGinnis said in the release. "It educates, challenges and connects us with each other and our communities."

The expanded natural playground was designed with both organizations in mind, featuring adaptable seating and engaging elements that encourage connection, creativity and play for all ages.

The playground was funded by the Rotary Club of South Haven.

"Thanks to the Rotary Club of South Haven, the outdoor space has doubled in size, with an extended fence that provides greater security and more usable green space," the release stated."

The new features include a matchbox car track, tire walk bridge, sensory garden with bird feeders, colorful chalkboard flowers, a music wall, a fully equipped mud kitchen, a covered stage crafted from repurposed doors and an oval-shaped tricycle track.

"Together, these additions offer children countless opportunities for imaginative, active, and social play," the release stated. "Equally important, the project incorporates inclusive upgrades to support members of Caring Connections."

The enhancements include a wheelchair-accessible picnic table for universal access, two covered swings that provide comfort and sensory support and an all-weather bench engraved with a message of gratitude to the Rotary Club.

"This project is more than just a place to play," Youth Development Company Executive Director, Brook Blanchard said in the release. "It represents a transformative space designed to bring our community together – young children and adults alike – through creativity, movement and shared experiences. We are deeply grateful to the Rotary Club for making this possible."

The community is invited to explore the new playground at the playground reveal event.

The South Haven Tribune makes every effort to ensure accuracy in its stories.
If you believe there is an error, please contact the editor of the page on which it occurred. If you are unsure who to contact, call 269-637-1104 to be directed to the appropriate editor.

SOUTH HAVEN SPORTS

Photo provided / Tom Renner

Kiersten Chalupa launches a kill during the Lady Rams home and conference opener on Wednesday defeating Constantine in four close sets.

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Country singer Lexi Adams to perform in SH

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Country singer-songwriter Lexi Adams will appear in concert on Sept. 7 at First Congregational UCC.

According to a news release, the performance is part of First Congregational UCC's summer concert series and will take place at 3 p.m. at 651 Phoenix St.

"Her voice feels like coming home, an undeniably cozy, inviting and warm sound that captivates any audience," the release stated. "Her rich vocal timbre, powerful yet gentle vocal techniques and the passion with which she performs will have any listener feeling as though she is singing directly to them."

Adams is an independent performing artist, currently residing in Southwest Michigan.

"Lexi knows the only way to truly connect with her audience is through sharing her stories and conveying heart through lyrics," the release stated.

Growing up, her mother always told her – "if you can't feel the song, then it means nothing."

A Belmont University alum, Lexi stayed in Nashville, Tenn. for five years after graduating: playing in writers 'rounds, church, tucked-away corners of coffee shops and hotel stores and working several jobs just trying to get by.

While she plans to eventually return to Nashville, Lexi enjoys singing for audiences all over Michigan.

Adams will perform a mix of brand-new music and classic country favorites by Willie Nelson, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton.

"Every night, I'm reminded why I do what I do," Adams said in the release. "Music truly is a universal language. I get to witness its healing power in people's lives over and over again. The faces, the stories, the connections, they're such a gift."

Tickets are $20 at the door.

For more information, call Diane and Lisa at 269-637-3804 (opt. 5).

Photo provided

Country singer-songwriter Lexi Adam will perform in First Congregational UCC's summer concert series on Sept. 7.

Van Buren County boosts entrepreneurship with new loan

By TRIBUNE STAFF

PAW PAW — In an effort to boost local entrepreneurship, the Van Buren County Board of Commissioners recently approved a business development loan for Jeremiah Smith Enterprises, LLC, through its Revolving Loan Fund.

According to a news release, the funding, recommended by the Van Buren County Economic Development Corporation, underscores the county's commitment to fueling small business growth and driving long-term economic vitality across the region.

Jeremiah Smith Enterprises, LLC will leverage a $35,000 capital infusion to acquire a high-capacity, commercial-grade washing machine for its Allegiant Linen Services division.

"This strategic investment will significantly increase operational capacity and streamline service delivery, meeting the rising demand from its expanding commercial clientele," the release stated.

Founded 14 years ago in the heart of Hartford as a neighborhood laundromat, the company has since evolved under the leadership of Jeremiah Smith into a trusted provider in the commercial linen industry – serving prominent healthcare institutions across the region.

"We're thrilled to champion small businesses like Jeremiah Smith Enterprises – the true backbone of our local economy," Van Buren County Commissioner Chair Randall Peat. Said in the release. "This project is a powerful example of how smart, community-focused investments can spark job creation, strengthen neighborhoods and drive long-term growth right here at home."

Photo provided

The Van Buren County Board of Commissioners recently approved a business development loan for Jeremiah Smith Enterprises, LLC.

The Van Buren County Economic Development Corporation is charged with managing the Revolving Loan Fund on behalf of the county and over the last decade has lent out a total of $1.02 million to 34 organizations.

"The purpose of the Revolving Loan Fund is to fuel the growth of local businesses and strengthen our community," Chairman of the Economic Development Corporation Board Tom Stanek said in the release. "Seeing entrepreneurs like Mr. Smith thrive – and knowing we played a part in that success – makes our work deeply rewarding."

Businesses in Van Buren County can access the funding by contacting Market One, the county's Economic Development Organization and administrative partner for the revolving loan fund.

"From the very first conversation to the closing of the loan, the team at Market One and the County made the entire process seamless," Smith said in the release. "At every step, I felt genuinely supported – not just as a business owner, but as an individual. Their commitment to helping my project succeed was clear, and I'm deeply grateful for their partnership and belief in my vision."

Solo show to feature Chicago columnist

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Theatre Series will present "Mike Royko: The Toughest Man In Chicago" starring Mitchell Bisschop on Sept. 13.

According to a news release, the performance will take place at 7:30 p.m. at Listiak Auditorium, 600 Elkenburg St.

"Mike Royko: The Toughest Man In Chicago" is a solo show written and performed by Bisschop about Chicago's most popular newspaper columnist Mike Royko.

"Mike Royko was a Chicago columnist who wrote about the city the way its people like to think of themselves: tough, cynical and with compassion for the little guy," the release stated. "Royko captured the spirit of Chicago through his incisive, poignant and often uproarious commentary.

Royko wrote over 7,500 columns in his 34 years as a newspaperman, always advocating for the working man.

"Dubbing Mayor Richard J. Daley 'Boss,' he fearlessly tackled corruption and championed the everyday citizen," the release stated.

Mitchell Bisschop graduated from Ithaca College with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting. In Chicago, he studied at the Second City Conservatory, in New York City at Peoples Improv Theatre and in Los Angeles at United Citizens Brigade.

BISSCHOP

"After an award-winning run in Los Angeles last June, Mike Royko: The Toughest Man In Chicago packed audiences in at The Kraine Theater in New York City and in Chicago for two runs of the show in 2024," the release stated.

Bisschop's past solo work has garnered him two Encore Awards and two Fringe Award nominations for best solo show, as well as successful runs in Los Angeles theaters.

He is a seasoned theatre artist and playwright with over 20 years of experience with a background in sketch and improv theater.

He is known for his previous solo works including "I Can Hear You Now" and "Pit of Goblins." His career spans stages in Chicago including Over the Tavern, Mercury Theater Chicago and in New York and Los Angeles.

"Mike Royko: The Toughest Man In Chicago" is being staged with the support of a grant from the South Haven Area Community Foundation and individual and corporate donors to the South Haven Theatre Series, Inc.

Tickets are $15 for adults and free for children and students.

Tickets can also be purchased online at www.southhaventheatreseries.org.

Annual Lakeshore Harvest Ride will promote nature, community and cycling

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Friends of the Blue Star Trail will host the 14th annual Lakeshore Harvest Ride on Sept. 13.

According to a news release, the Friends of the Blue Star Trail stages the annual Lakeshore Harvest Ride to raise money to fund the engineering and construction of the Blue Star Trail.

"Participating riders will experience the scenic beauty of Southwest Michigan as they bike through our rolling countryside and visit a number of planned stops including charming wineries, cider mills, family farms, orchards and art studios," the release stated.

Along the way riders can sample the local fare, make purchases and receive complimentary concierge service to deliver their purchases back to their ride starting point.

"The Lakeshore Harvest Ride is a highly anticipated event that not only celebrates the natural beauty of our region, but also promotes health, wellness and community engagement," Executive Director of the Saugatuck Douglas Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Lisa Mize points said in the release. "By bringing together cycling enthusiasts and nature lovers, this event fosters a deeper connection with the stunning landscapes that surround us."

Participating riders can start their day at either the Kal-Haven Trailhead in South Haven or Schultz Park in Douglas. Riders choose one of four route options from each starting point – choosing between 15, 25, 45 and 60 miles in length.

"At the Saugatuck Douglas Area CVB, we understand the importance of supporting initiatives that enrich our community and promote sustainable tourism," Mize said. "The Lakeshore Harvest Ride and the Friends of the Blue Star Trail align perfectly with our values and we are delighted to once again lend our support."

Riders, including many groups and families, can enjoy complimentary lunch, snacks, fruit, water and Gatorade at multiple rest stops along the routes.

"We are so thankful to the more than 40 sponsors and 125 volunteers who work tirelessly to make this event so special for our riders," Friends board member and LHR Chairperson Jack Eisinger said in the release. "This event would not be possible without their enthusiastic support."

Cottage Home, celebrating their 25th year of building custom homes in the community, is this year's lead sponsor for the event.

"As a local custom home builder, I believe it is very important to invest in our local communities," Cottage Home President Brian Bosgraaf said in the release. "Easy access to safe biking, walking and running trails is a huge priority. I believe the Blue Star Trail will be a tremendous asset for our communities for many generations to come."

Other sponsors include the Saugatuck Douglas Area Convention and Visitors Bureau as Trail Partner and Meijer as Trail Blazer.

"LHR is truly a special event," Lakeshore Harvest Ride Marketing Manager Kim Redlin said in the release. "A cool fall day, bounteous local harvest, good friends, outdoor exercise and it all benefits the Blue Star Trail which will connect us all."

Over the past three years, this event has generated over $100,000 to support engineering and construction of the Blue Star Trail. Last year's event generated over $45,000.

"The Friends of the Blue Star Trail have demonstrated unwavering dedication to completing and enhancing the Blue Star Trail, a treasured resource that offers residents and visitors alike a chance to explore the wonders of our area on foot or by bicycle," Mize said. "Their commitment to this trail ensures that future generations can continue to benefit from the recreational and environmental opportunities it provides."

President of the Friends of the Blue Star Trail Clark Carmichael said in the release that the north section of the Blue Star Trail in Saugatuck City and Saugatuck Township is fully funded and awaits input from the local Indian tribal council.

When complete there will be four miles of contiguous trail running from Douglas north to connect to the Beeline Trail.

"Significant progress has been made for the next section going south from Douglas, which will add three more miles of trail from Wiley Rd to M89," Carmichael said. "MDOT recently notified us of tentative grant approval for this section."

Carmichael said in the release that progress is being made on the south end of the trail running from the Kal-Haven Trail north to Baseline Road with construction planned for 2026.

Registration is open online at LHRide.com.

MONARCH

From page A1

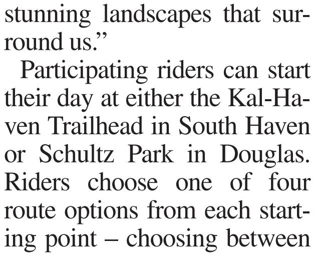
every time it needs to do activity in a right-of-way. He said because the affected areas will be the three feet furthest from the road, the public should notice no difference in road department mowing or vision while traveling.

"We can still maintain the right-of-ways while preserving the outer three feet," Heyliger added.

Usable spaces

Beth Denton works in the Three Oaks office of Pizzo & Associates, which focuses on restoring native habitats.

"We always want to encourage cities and townships to do what they can to encourage pollinators," she said. "Natural habitats are dwindling because of development, taking away habitats where bees and butterflies can feed and lay eggs."



Don Campbell / HP file photo

Monarch butterflies flit among flowers in 2022 in St. Joseph.

She said the monarch butterfly is endangered because milkweed, its favored food source, is decreasing due to housing and industrial developments. Denton is a volunteer for the West Michigan Butterfly Network, and said she routinely visits the Chikaming Open Lands preserve to count butterflies.

St. Joseph resident Chris Lannert said the city became a Bee City USA in 2023, after work by the city's Sustainability Committee, which he serves on. The Bee City Committee is a sub-committee of the Sustainability Committee. Upon approval by the city, a garden was planted on the bluff to attract bees and butterflies.

Lannert said he has proposed to the committee the development of a pollinated garden on city property at the corner of Langley and Napier avenues.

Kim Jorgensen-Gane who co-chairs the Sustainability Committee, said the committee is dedicated to the business of supporting pollinator habitats.

"We want to create more usable spaces, but we're very much just in the conversation stage of this idea," she said.

Kayla Griffith, director of special projects and communications for the city of St. Joseph, echoed that sentiment.

"We want to stress that this is an idea, and something we'd like to do, but there has been no formal action on it," she said. "We want to protect pollinators and attract bees and butterflies, including the monarch. The goal is to help boost their population."

Griffith said before any action is taken, discussions would be held with officials from Corewell Health Lakeland Hospital, across Napier Avenue from the proposed site, and neighbors living nearby.

Milkweed and goldenrod were previously on the city's list of noxious weeds, and were not allowed to be planted, Griffith said. But that has since changed. Within the past year, she said those have been removed from the list of noxious weeds, and can now be planted.

She said milkweed was previously thought to be toxic to livestock, and goldenrod, a type of ragweed, was thought to heavily contribute to allergies, but has since been found to be "pretty harmless."

South Haven Tribune Editor Julie Newell contributed to this story.

FLYWHEELERS

From page A1

"Kid's Day" at the show. Activities start with a Kiddies Pedal Pull at noon, a sawdust pile treasure hunt at 3:30 p.m. and the John Dudley Magic Show at 7 p.m. Tractor games will be held for the children who have access to riding lawn tractors.

Evening entertainment will include a square dance on Thursday, local musician Dan Geib and the Black River Band on Friday and What You See Is What You Get on Saturday. Karaoke will take place on Friday and Saturday as well.

The "South Haven Tractor Cruise" is scheduled for 4:30 p.m. on Thursday where participants drive tractors of all makes and models into downtown South Haven, cruise South Beach and then stop for dinner.

Another special activity on the schedule is a railroad track laying demonstration at 10 a.m on Saturday.

"Volunteers, who have been working all summer building the Black River Railroad, will show how the wooden ties are spaced, rails bolted down and ballast applied," the release stated.

The historic Hanson Express grand scale steam locomotive that was donated to the museum in 2022 will be fired up and used to pull the ballast car along the rail that is already laid.

Along with the various activities, attendees can enjoy some sweet corn.

"Yeah, we hear from a lot of our visitors that the first thing they do when they get here is get some corn," Ingalls said in the release.

Cooked by an antique Nichols and Shepard steam traction engine the corn on the cob is smothered in butter, salt and pepper.

Gates open at 8 a.m. rain or shine.

Admission is $10. Children 12 and under are free with a paid adult admission.

Thursday is Senior's Day and admission is $5 for those 62 and over. On Sunday, admission is only $5 for adults.

Rustic camping sites are available on a first-come basis. Cost is $40 per night and includes admission for two people.

This is a pet-free event for those paying admission. Pets are allowed with exhibitors, campers and vendors only.

Personal transportation vehicles, such as golf carts, will be charged a $30 registration fee which is good for the entire event. ATVs, dirt bikes, political items and firearms are not permitted.

Registration opens at 8 a.m. on Sept. 2.

The Michigan Flywheelers Museum is located at 06285 68th Street, two miles east of South Haven.

For more information, contact the museum via phone at 269-639-2010, via email at michiganflywheelers@yahoo.com, or on Facebook.

A complete show schedule is available at www.michiganflywheelers.org.

South Haven
Tribune

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CASCO TOWNSHIP, ALLEGAN COUNTY NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that the Planning Commission of Casco Township will conduct a public hearing and regular meeting concerning the following matters on Wednesday, September 17, 2025, at 6:00 p.m. at the Casco Township Hall, 7104 107th Ave, South Haven, MI 49090.

Flying Fojtiks LLC, Missy Fojtik, Daydreamer Domes has petitioned to amend the approved special use permit to amend/revise ancillary uses at 397 Blue Star Hwy, 0302-075-001-01, 0302-075-001-02, 0302-074-021-01, 0302-019-015-00, 0302-030-012-00.

Any other business that may come before the Planning Commission
PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that the application packet can be reviewed at the Casco Township Hall during regular business hours at 7104 107th Ave, South Haven or by contacting the Zoning Administrator for an electronic copy 1-800-626-5964 mtsallegan@frontier.com
PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that written comments may be submitted to Clerk at the Township Hall, by mail (to address below), or email to the zoning administrator, mtsallegan@frontier.com. All written comments must be submitted no later than 4:00pm the day preceding the public hearing (Tues Sept 16, 4p) Casco Township will provide necessary reasonable auxiliary aids and services to individuals with disabilities at the hearing upon seven (7) days' notice to the Casco Township Clerk.

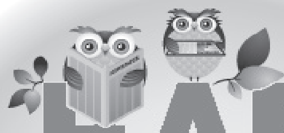
Rachel Ridley
Casco Township Clerk
7104 107th Ave,
South Haven MI 49090
269-637-4441

Tasha Smalley
Zoning Administrator
1-800-626-5964

PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

To place a public notice, please send your requests to **legals@pmginmi.com.**

Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.



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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "Altered Consumerism" exhibition from Aug. 8 through Sept. 20.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays starting Sept. 2.

South Haven Farm Market: Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. through October at Huron Street Pavilion.

Daydreamer Domes: Local community pool day every Tuesday at 11 a.m.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lake Arvesta: Summer at the pasture concert every Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: New Exhibit – "The Adventures of Liberty Hyde Bailey – Chicago: 1872." Available during museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

September

3 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

4 – Football: Boy junior varsity game against Holland Public Schools at 6 p.m.

4-7 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Antique Engine and Tractor Show. Gates open at 8 a.m. Admission is $10 per person. Children 12 years old and under are free with paid admission.

5 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-doh play date at 11 a.m.

7 – First Congregational UCC – Summer Concert Series presents Lexi Adams at 3 p.m.

8 – Golf: SAC Lakeshore Jam, girls varsity at 4 p.m. at Hawkshead.

8 – Paw Paw Community Chorus: Christman Concert practice begins at 7 p.m. at First Presbyterian Church in Paw Paw.

8 – Stellar Steppers: Sunrise to Sunset Walk along the Kal-Haven Trail.

9 – Swimming: Girls varsity against Harper Creek High School at 6 p.m.

9 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Strummers ukulele event for all ages from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

10 – South Haven Memorial Library: Author event with Susan Ryan to promote her new medical memoir: "Brainstorm: Navigating Life with Chronic Migraine."

10 – Cross Country: Conference Jamboree, boys and girls varsity against Saugatuck High School at 5 p.m. at Warner Camp.

10 – Football: Middle school boys against Coloma High School at 5 p.m.

11 – South Haven Area Young Professionals: Monthly networking event from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at New Park Gastropub.

11 – Football: Boys junior varsity against Coloma High School at 6 p.m.

11 – South Haven Speaker Series: The impact of immigration law on families presented by Prof. David Thronson.

13 – South Haven Jazz Festival: From 5 to 8 p.m. featuring Jim Cooper Quartet, Edye Evans Hyde and The Terry Lower Trio and the Lake Effect Jazz Big Band and Tim Coffman.

13 – Lakeshore Harvest Ride.

13 – South Haven Theatre Series: "Mike Royko: The Toughest Man in Chicago" at 7:30 p.m. at Listiak Auditorium. Tickets cost $15.

15 – Soccer: Middle school boys against Coloma High School at North Shore Elementary School.

15 – Soccer: Boys varsity against Coloma High School at 6 p.m.

16 – Swimming: Girls varsity against Allegan Public Schools at 6 p.m.

17 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

17 – Volleyball: Girls middle school against Black River Public School.

17 – Football: Boys middle school against Allegan Public Schools at 5 p.m.

18 – After Business Ours: Networking event hosted by South Haven Banking Center. For South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce members only. From 5 to 7 p.m. RSVP required.

18 – Tennis: Boys varsity against Hackett Catholic Prep at 4:30 p.m.

19 – Football: Boys varsity against Constantine High School at 7 p.m.

23 – Tennis: Boys varsity against Buchanan High School at 4:30 p.m.

24 – Soccer: Boys middle school against Fennville High School at North Shore Elementary School.

Volleyball: Girls middle school against Watervliet High School.

24 – Soccer: Boys junior varsity against Fennville High School at 5 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

24 – Soccer: Boys varsity against Fennville High School at 6:30 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

24 – Historical Association of South Haven: "Genealogy for Beginners" presentation by Katherine Wilson from 7 to 8 p.m.

Al-Van Humane Society
Adopt ♥ Volunteer ♥ Donate ♥ Advocate
73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
phone 269.637.5062 fax 269.639.2242
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pet of the Week, Mickey!

Mickey

Oh Mickey, you're so fine... he's so fine he'll blow your mind! Meet Mickey, our undefeated king of parkour and this week's #PetoftheWeek!

This young, bouncy boy loves to jump, run, and show off his athletic skills. He can be a little timid at first but give him a hot dog or some cheese and you'll have a new best friend in no time. Mickey is house trained, good with kids, and gets along well with other dogs. He's eager to learn and just needs a patient human to help him polish his manners. When he's not bouncing around, Mickey loves to lounge and soak up the good life. Whether you're looking for a walking partner or a couch buddy, he's your guy. Come meet Mickey and see why he's so fine for yourself! Visit us at al-van.org/adopt to learn more.

Par-4-Paws

Swing into action at Par 4 Paws, Al-Van Humane Society's annual golf outing! Join us Saturday, September 21st at Hawkshead Golf Course for a 4-person scramble starting at 9am. After your round, enjoy a tasty lunch and browse a silent auction packed with fantastic items. Whether you're a pro with the perfect swing or just in it for some fun on the fairway, every shot helps support animals in need. Don't miss this chance to enjoy a great day of golf while making a difference for the pets at Al-Van Humane Society. Sign up today at al-van.org or call us at (269) 637-5062.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
wet cat and dog food

This Week's Wishlist This week our biggest need is cleaning supplies. Keeping our shelter sparkling clean isn't just about looking nice, it's about keeping our animals healthy and comfortable! Supplies like medium and large latex gloves, paper towels, trash bags and dish soap help us maintain a safe, sanitary space for all the pets in our care. Every roll, bottle, or box makes a big difference!

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- Blessings in a Backpack South Haven is a chapter of a national 501c3 corporation headquartered in Louisville, KY.
- South Haven Chapter was established in 2012.
- Program is an "opt-in" service for families.
- Served 27% of SHPS elementary school students in '24-'25 year.
- Five community organizations volunteer to pack the food bags each week.
- Weekly food costs are currently $4.00+ per student = $125 per year.
- Rotary Club of South Haven began to coordinate the program in 2023.
- Totally funded by your donations; entirely managed by volunteers.

Help us feed our children in need. Donate to either:

South Haven Area Community Foundation Blessings in a Backpack Action Fund
PO Box 507
South Haven, MI 49090

or to:

Blessings in a Backpack South Haven, MI Fund #1123
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Louisville, KY 40295

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3 PM
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7 - 10PM
THE TUESDAYS

SUNDAY

Noon - 2PM
ACCORDIAN MIKE

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Derek White / Bentonville Film Festival via Getty Images / TNS

Ryan Kaji, middle, attends the Ryan's World Meet & Greet during the 10th Annual Bentonville Film Festival on June 14, 2024, in Bentonville, Arkansas.

'Kidfluencers'

Their childhoods are on display for millions. States want to protect them

By MADYSON FITZGERALD
Stateline.org (TNS)

A couple of years ago, Alisa Jno-Charles saw her now 9-year-old daughter watching a YouTube video of several children and their swift ninja moves.

The video was from Ninja Kidz TV, a YouTube channel that features four young siblings who were raised in a martial arts studio, according to their official website. The channel has about 23.9 million subscribers.

Jno-Charles scrolled through the Ninja Kidz TV videos and noticed that the content featured more than just the kids' ninja antics: Every single part of their lives was documented, she said.

"It was their first date, and their insecurities about social situations, and major life decisions – like the type of school they should go to – and their birthday parties," Jno-Charles said. "It was everything. And that didn't sit well with me."

Jno-Charles did some more digging into "kidfluencing" on YouTube. She knew, of course, about social media influencers, and that it had become accepted as a legitimate job – for adults. But were there protections, she wondered, "for children who can't actually make that decision to go into that business themselves?"

An increasing number of state lawmakers are asking the same question.

In the absence of federal regulations, some legislators are pushing to protect child influencers. Many of the measures aim to ensure kids are compensated fairly for their work, by requiring adult account managers – usually their parents – to set aside any earnings in a trust fund the children can access once they are adults. Some of the bills also aim to give children more control over the content they are featured in.

The experience with her daughter prompted Jno-Charles, an assistant professor of entrepreneurship at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, to research the fast-growing industry.

In a paper published earlier this year in the Journal of Business Ethics, Jno-Charles and Canadian researcher Daniel Clark concluded that kidfluencing was "a new form of child labor" that can financially exploit kids and violate their privacy, among other harms.

"Kidfluencing represents a uniquely insidious threat because (it's) seemingly so benign," Jno-Charles and Clark wrote. "It is prone to willful blindness from the parents, the platforms, the audience, and society at large."

The risks are especially great, they argue, when kidfluencers are the family's primary source of income, "obscuring the distinction between the best interests of the child and those of the family."

But Jno-Charles said many of the state bills focus on financial compensation while ignoring other issues, such as the child's reputation and whether it will harm their future employment opportunities, relationships and more.

"We've seen so many stories come out on families that have exploited and abused their children in a lot of very terrible ways, the least of which is monetarily," she said. "How do you protect children from those situations? I feel like these regulations are a good start, but it's not really addressing what I perceive to be the true issues around influence."

40 million subscribers

Kidfluencers and other content creators make money by hawking products and services to the people who follow them. The job has become increasingly lucrative as companies spend more on social media marketing. Some influencers can earn $10,000 or more for a single post, said Alex Ambrose, a policy analyst at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a nonprofit focused on science and technology.

Ryan's World is largely credited as being the first kidfluencer channel on YouTube. The channel got its start in 2015 with videos featuring 3-year-old Ryan Kaji, who enjoyed unboxing new toys.

Today, Ryan is entering his teen years, and Ryan's World has nearly 40 million subscribers. The Ryan's World brand is managed by Sunlight Entertainment, a family-owned production company headed by Ryan's father. And this year, Ryan Kaji was No. 21 on the Forbes Top Creators list, with $35 million in earnings as of late June.

"It's so easy for children to just start creating," Ambrose said. "And with TikTok and Instagram, the ability to edit videos and edit content now is so much easier than it was in the past. You can just start creating with very simple tools that are available to folks."

Kidfluencers are growing in popularity across nearly every social media platform. While some youths have started accounts on their own, others are managed and monitored by their parents.

Other forms of media already have labor standards. Children who appear on television or in films have contracts that stipulate what they will be paid. Some states, including California, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico and New York, have laws mandating that employers of child actors set aside a portion of their earnings – generally 15 percent – in a trust the actors can access when they become adults.

The first such law was enacted by California in 1939. The Coogan Law was inspired by child actor Jackie Coogan, who played the title role in Charlie Chaplin's "The Kid" and was one of Hollywood's first child stars. When Coogan became an adult, he discovered that his parents had squandered much of the money he had earned.

States step in

In 2023, Illinois expanded its version of the Coogan Law to include kidfluencers, and California followed suit in 2024 (the laws took effect in 2024 and 2025, respectively).

This year, at least four states – Arkansas, Montana, Utah and Virginia – have amended their child labor laws to mandate trusts and other protections for content creators who are minors. And when Hawaii this year approved its own version of the Coogan Law, it included child influencers in the definition of minors engaged in "theatrical employment."

The New Jersey General Assembly and the New York Senate also approved child influencer legislation this year, but neither has become law.

Arkansas Republican state Rep. Zack Gramlich, who sponsored the legislation in his state, is a schoolteacher and the father of a 2-year-old and a 9-month-old. Both in the Legislature and at home, Gramlich said, he's worked toward ensuring kids are protected when they use the internet.

The Arkansas legislation he authored has a trust requirement, but it also includes other protections for child influencers, such as requiring adults to pay minors if they are using them to create content for money. For example, a minor must be paid if they or their likeness appears in at least 30 percent of the content produced over 30 days, or if the adult earned at least $15,000 in the previous 12 months.

The legislation also prohibits accounts from sharing "any visual depiction of a minor with the intent to sexually gratify or elicit a sexual response in the viewer or any other person."

This goes beyond existing prohibitions on child pornography to include, for example, parents who dress their child-influencer daughters in bikinis or dance leotards for their followers – some of whom are paying a monthly fee to see that kind of content, according to an investigation by The New York Times.

Gramlich said Google helped him write the legislation. Ambrose, of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, said other social media companies have played a similar role in other states, and are establishing new policies for content featuring children.

Instagram last month announced new protections for adult-managed accounts that primarily feature children. This includes placing these accounts into a stricter category to prevent unwanted messages and turning on filters for offensive comments, according to the announcement.

Google and Meta did not grant Stateline requests for interviews.

A handful of legislators pushed back against the bill, Gramlich said, because they were concerned about putting too much responsibility on the parents. But when a parent is making an additional $15,000 a year by posting videos of their children, he said, there must be rules.

"In some ways, this is an extension of child labor protections," Gramlich said. "We're at the point where kids aren't in the mines anymore, but it looks like they're going to be on the internet. But now, their parents may be making money off their efforts, and they never get to see it."

Social media audiences do not see the production behind online content, Gramlich said. These audiences are only seeing the finished product. And younger kids may not realize that their work is being used for money and will forever exist online, he said.

"If you're anything like me, you've been told for the last 15 years that everything you put on the internet is there forever," Gramlich said. "But can a child really understand what that means?"

The Utah legislation also goes beyond trusts. Utah Democratic state Rep. Doug Owens, the House sponsor of the bill, wanted to make sure that child influencers had the right to delete their content once they became adults. His legislation, which was signed into law by Republican Gov. Spencer Cox in March, requires that social media companies create a process for people who want their content removed or edited.

Before the legislation was drafted, two people reached out to Owens asking him to propose protections for child actors and influencers. One was a constituent – a child actor who had appeared in traditional television commercials.

The second, he said, was Kevin Franke, the ex-husband of former YouTube family vlogger Ruby Franke. In 2023, the popular YouTube star was arrested after her 12-year-old son, with duct tape stuck to his ankles and wrists, ran to a neighbor's house and asked for food and water. She was later convicted on child abuse charges and sentenced to up to 30 years in prison.

Recent docuseries on Netflix and Hulu have revealed the ways in which kidfluencing can lead to children experiencing peer pressure, manipulation, child abuse and, in the case of the Franke family, torture.

Both the child actor and Kevin Franke said children in the entertainment industry – including kidfluencers – should have adults who are looking out for them, Owens said.

"I think social media is just an obvious place where kids need some protection," he said.

But most state legislatures remain focused on broader social media concerns, such as age restrictions, said Georgia Democratic state Rep. Kim Schofield, who has sponsored a child influencer bill in her state.

In February, Schofield introduced a measure that would mandate trusts for child influencers. Her bill also would restrict children's work schedules: A child between the ages of 9 and 16, for instance, would be barred from working more than five hours a day.

"I'm so excited to see that these kids are just so talented," Schofield said. "They have a means to broaden and expand an endless universe online – I love that I get to see that. But if you're making so much money and making the family rich, I want to make sure that you're getting a piece of the pie."

Stateline is part of States Newsroom, a national nonprofit news organization focused on state policy. Visit at stateline.org.

FOCUS

Jefferee Woo / Tampa Bay Times / TNS

A creative space for students at the South Tampa Microschool in Tampa, Florida. These spaces conspicuously lack traditional school desks.

Microschools are growing in popularity, but state regulations haven't caught up

By ROBBIE SEQUEIRA
Stateline.org (TNS)

When Siri Fiske founded the Mysa Microschool in Washington, D.C., in 2016, there wasn't a widely accepted term for her small, one-room schoolhouse model.

Now, the school is referred to on its website as one of the first microschools in the nation, and Fiske has seen a growing microschool movement since the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the five years since remote schooling amid pandemic-era lockdowns, microschools and homeschooling have emerged as increasingly popular alternatives to traditional public and private models. Smaller class sizes, individualized classrooms and lack of standardization are an appeal to parents, Fiske said.

"There's this idea that people who open microschools are doing it for cultish or religious reasons, and there's a misconception that all are like that," Fiske said. "I've seen my students graduate into top colleges. There's many ways to achieve academic success."

Some education experts, however, have expressed concern about the growing movement. They question whether microschools are properly regulated and being held accountable, and whether they'll pull dollars out of the public education system.

There is no federal definition of a microschool, and with the Trump administration's plans to shutter the U.S. Department of Education, the onus is on states to figure them out.

In some states, microschools face a bind: If they operate as private schools, they're required to meet facility, staffing and curricular standards that are often cost-prohibitive for schools their size. If they operate under homeschool laws, they face oversight, assessment mandates and reporting requirements that aren't designed for multifamily or educator-led models.

Some states, including Georgia, Tennessee and Texas, have passed "Learning Rights Protection Acts" to codify microschools' right to operate.

In Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts and Oregon, learning pods and microschools often face child care or private school licensing requirements if they involve multiple families, hire instructors or provide compensation for child care.

"Schools calling themselves microschools today are not what I would've called one back then. But I think that's OK. It's evolving," Fiske said.

She pointed to the national school choice movement – and states such as West Virginia – for helping the microschool movement flourish.

In 2022, West Virginia became one of the few states to define a microschool, distinctly separating it from a private school, homeschool or learning pod.

Those classifications, and how these schools are funded and regulated, affect everything from whether a school must hire certified teachers to how it ensures student safety or civil rights protections. And with more public dollars flowing to private or hybrid learning options through vouchers and education savings accounts – to the detriment of public school funding, some argue – states will need to define these schools and their place in the ecosystem.

States will have to fill the gaps, said Weadé James, senior director of K-12 education policy with the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning policy think tank.

"Accountability can vary wildly. Some microschools aren't required to have certified teachers, conduct annual assessments, or even guarantee civil rights protections," said James. "If public voucher dollars are going to a microschool, there has to be some level of oversight and accountability."

Many microschools aren't accredited

Microschools defy easy classification, and many advocates argue that's by design. Don Soifer, CEO of the National Microschooling Center, an industry group, cautions lawmakers against rushing to impose fixed legal definitions.

"Innovation is happening too fast. The moment you define it in law, it becomes obsolete," Soifer said.

A 2024 sector analysis by the National Microschooling Center – one of the only sources of national data on the topic – found that many schools are operating outside traditional education principles.

In a survey of 400 microschools across 41 states, more than 60 percent of founders reported they were not currently licensed educators. Eighty-four percent reported their schools were not accredited. Among prospective founders, 48 percent are licensed educators (though only 14 percent currently work in public schools), 32 percent come from non-education fields, and 23 percent are parents building schools for their own children.

Most microschools (55 percent) operate under homeschool laws, while others function as private schools (37 percent), charters (6 percent) or fall into unique state categories (3 percent), according to the analysis.

"So, you can be a private or homeschool microschool program, where you aren't required to provide students with certified teachers, or you aren't required to conduct annual assessments," James said.

Often described as "homeschool hybrids" or "small-scale learning communities," microschools often serve around 16 students or fewer, and tend to cater to families with average or above-average incomes in their area. In some states, microschools have been authorized to receive public funds through voucher programs.

Some critics note that, like private schools, microschools may charge tuition, potentially excluding lower-income families and contributing to educational disparities.

These schools often operate in commercial spaces (41 percent), private residences (28 percent) or houses of worship (25 percent), according to the National Microschooling Center. The center also found the movement is diversifying: 37 percent of prospective founders are people of color, compared with 27 percent of current operators.

Because building and zoning codes vary from state to state and locality to locality, many operators may be unaware of the extra costs to meet school codes standards. Fiske recalls difficulties in expanding from Washington, D.C., to Vermont, which has stricter laws on water fountain requirements.

"Most people in the U.S. starting a microschool are doing it under the radar because the regulations to open a licensed school are so intense," Fiske said. For the new school, she recalled, "it took us forever, and we had to install ADA-compliant toilets and water fountains for just 10 kids in Vermont."

'Microschooling is not one thing'

Microschools also operate in a legal gray zone, often outside the traditional K-12 system and subject to a patchwork of state and local policies that can either support or constrain their growth.

Growth has accelerated in conservative-leaning states with robust school choice programs, such as Arizona and Florida. Other states, such as Maryland, New York and North Dakota, have more restrictive homeschool or private school laws.

"Microschooling is not one thing. These schools look different in every state, and the policy frameworks around them vary wildly," said Soifer, of the National Microschooling Center.

What is classified as a microschool can vary from "10 kids in a basement in Kentucky" to a 200-kid schoolhouse elsewhere.

Fiske said states need to create a way for operators and parents to know what to expect in a certain state, and help willing operators get the education and business acumen they need to run the schools successfully.

"But if you look at who is starting microschools in the U.S., it's a lot of millennial parents who may not have any teacher training but wanted to create a learning environment for their children and others in the local community," said Fiske. "And without efforts by the state to provide some incentives to earn accreditation and information as both a school and a small business, a few of these will find themselves going under."

Seeking choices

After two decades working in conventional schools in the United States and around the world – including in Brazil, Egypt and Qatar – Justine Wilson turned down a high-paying leadership role at a prestigious private school. Instead, in 2023 she opened Curious and Kind Education, a two-day-a-week microschool in Sarasota, Florida, built around trust, nature-based learning and self-directed play.

Enrollment at Curious and Kind is mostly driven by word of mouth, she said. The program now has a waitlist. And Wilson has seen her enrollment grow from 18 students in her first year to roughly 100 students for the upcoming school year.

"The number of 5-year-olds on my waitlist is shocking," she said, "and then I realized they're COVID babies and their parents have really been driving this search for alternative schooling since the pandemic."

James, of the Center for American Progress, questions whether microschools generally match the quality of traditional public schools, which still educate more than 80 percent of schoolchildren. She says families may be under the assumption that school choice options equate to better quality.

"We have created an illusion of choice to be quality, and I think a lot of families are seeking various choice options because they associate that with quality. But that doesn't necessarily mean that where those students are going is any better than where they left," she said.

"We need to take a closer look at what we are presenting to families," James said. "It's not just about having options and having a choice. It's about having quality choice options."

That quality, Soifer said, is what microschools are trying to achieve.

"Microschools do very well on the left, on the right ... at the top end of the economy and at the fragile end of the income spectrum," he said. "It's really a matter of the new economy and a new way of thinking about education."

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Navy is retiring the last of its storied cruisers

To veterans, they were ‘the pinnacle of naval power’

By GARY ROBBINS
The San Diego Union-Tribune (TNS)

Navy cruisers such as the USS Princeton, seen here in 2001, have reached old age and will soon vanish from the fleet after more than 140 years of service.
Inez Lawson / US Navy / Getty Images / TNS

SAN DIEGO — Falling in love can happen in a snap. Dave Hatzenbuehler knows this from the way he responded nearly a half-century ago upon noticing a big, brooding presence in San Diego Bay.

He’d caught sight of a Navy cruiser, a famously dynamic type of ship that had been turning heads since the 1880s. This one was the USS Long Beach, a muscular brute measuring 721 feet from stem to stern. It also was the world’s first nuclear-powered missile cruiser.

“It was so powerful and sleek and beautiful,” recalled Hatzenbuehler, who was vacationing in San Diego at the time. “I joined the Navy as soon as I went home to Dallas. I wanted to be on a ship like that.”

This wasn’t a singular response, or a random one.

As the Navy nears its 250th anniversary in October, there’s a lot of reminiscing going on about the fleet. Much of it involves cruisers – renowned for shielding aircraft carriers, attacking distant enemies, flushing submarines from the deep, and roaming the seas as lone wolfs.

“They were always there to protect us when we were flying back to the carriers,” said Jack Allen of Escondido, who flew F-8 Crusaders during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. “Cruisers had a way of picking threats out of the sky.”

Now is also a bittersweet moment for current and former sailors in San Diego, the largest Navy town on the West Coast.

Cruisers helped the Navy shift from sail to steam propulsion, helped end the war in the Pacific and kept the Soviets at bay during the Cold War. But they’ve reached old age and will soon vanish from the fleet after more than 140 years of service. Replacing many of them are Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, a new type of ship whose versatility, firepower and air defense are regarded as the Navy’s best.

These days, just nine of the 27 Ticonderoga-class cruisers commissioned during the Cold War era are still in service. That number will drop to three in 2027 and zero in 2029, the Navy says.

Among the next to go will be the 36-year-old USS Princeton, which is about to return to San Diego after helping shield the carrier USS Carl Vinson during a nine-month deployment. San Diego’s other cruiser, USS Cape St. George, is expected to be one of the last to retire.

The exact timing of the shutdown isn’t clear. The Navy is struggling to conduct the maintenance its ships need to go to sea, which could further limit its use of the cruisers in the little time they have left.

There’s also a quality problem.

A recent effort to modernize 11 cruisers fell into disarray. Only three are expected to get complete upgrades, and they’ll spend less time on patrol than forecast, according to a 2024 report by the Government Accountability Office.

The project “wasted” $1.84 billion, the GAO said in unusually candid words.

This bothers many veterans, some of whom prefer to simply focus on the ships’ storied past.

“Cruisers represented the pinnacle of naval power in the world,” said Delbert Worrell of Ramona, California, who served on the USS Long Beach in the late 1970s. “I’m proud I served on one.”

Cruisers date back to the 1880s, when the Navy introduced them as iron-hulled, steam-powered ships. They had a specific purpose: protect U.S. merchant vessels and explore national interests abroad.

The first cruiser to visit San Diego was the USS California (CA-6), which arrived in 1907 and was later renamed after the city, just as the region was blooming into a Navy town.

Things literally took off in 1911. That was the year aviator Glenn Curtiss flew a seaplane from North Island on Coronado out into the harbor, where he landed in the water next to the cruiser USS Pennsylvania. The plane was hoisted aboard, then returned to the bay.

That moment suggested that planes had a place in the military. The Navy soon bought a Curtiss aircraft – a direct step toward the creation of aircraft carriers. Lumbering flattops soon appeared in ports like San Diego, and they needed escort ships.

Cruisers were perfect for the job. They were fast, highly maneuverable and regularly upgraded with a wide variety of weapons. They could defend and fight.

“We had guns, we had torpedoes, we had Harpoon missiles, we had Standard 1 missiles, we had ASROC missiles,” said Hatzenbuehler, who served on the nuclear-powered USS Texas, along with other ships, from 1980 until 2003. “We had everything.”

The cruiser’s supremacy became especially evident in World War II, when more than 80 of the ships went into service, sinking and damaging dozens of enemy vessels.

Of particular note was the USS San Diego (CL-53), the second cruiser to carry that name. It earned 18 battle stars – commendations for participating in important campaigns.

The San Diego shielded the carrier USS Hornet during the Battle of Guadalcanal, helping turn the war in the Pacific in favor of allied forces. It was the first major Allied warship to enter Tokyo Bay when the war ended.

“It terms of sheer numbers, firepower and contributions, I think the cruisers – especially when you look at World War II – really played a vital role,” said Kevin Sheehan, a historian at the Maritime Museum of San Diego.

But there were devastating losses along the way.

Components of Little Boy, the atomic bomb the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima, were quietly delivered to Tinian Island in 1945 by the cruiser USS Indianapolis. Japan sank the ship a short time later, killing 880 sailors and Marines.

These sorts of campaigns dredged up a lot of memories for naval author Kevin Eyer, a part-time San Diego resident who served on seven cruisers.

One of those ships stood out above others.

In August 1990, when Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait, a big supplier of oil to the U.S., Eyer was a combat systems officer on the cruiser USS Antietam, operating in the Indian Ocean.

“We were directed to immediately go to the northern Persian Gulf, because the U.S. needed an adult in the room – which is how people thought about cruisers and their commanders,” he said. “We got there and were alone, which was scary. We thought Iraq might fire Exocet cruise missiles at us.

“But we also had an edge – the AEGIS Combat System, which coordinated all of the weapons systems on the ship so that they seamlessly worked in concert. Iraq ended up not attacking us. But we had AEGIS. We had a way to fight, something that’s always been true about cruisers.”

The following months involved one of the largest military buildups in U.S. history, partly due to growing concern that Iraq would attack Saudi Arabia, causing economic upheaval throughout the Middle East.

More than 170 Navy ships were dispatched to the region – including San Diego-based carrier battle groups led by the USS Ranger and by the USS Midway, which served as the flagship for naval aviation in the Persian Gulf.

Among their escorts were four cruisers. Two of them – USS Mobile Bay and USS Bunker Hill – were among the first to fire cruise missiles at Iraq when Operation Desert Storm began on Jan. 16, 1991. The USS Princeton, based in Long Beach at the time, also reached the gulf, where it struck a mine.

Cruisers continued to play key roles in the following years – notably San Diego’s USS John Paul Jones. On Oct. 7, 2001, it became the first American warship to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles into Afghanistan when the war there got underway.

But as the years passed, these ships began to fade from the scene, largely due to aging. Some developed cracks in their superstructures. The Navy decided not to build a new class of cruisers, signaling their imminent demise – the same thing that happened a decade ago, when the last of the Navy’s frigates were decommissioned.

It’s possible cruisers will, in a sense, live on. The Navy has proposed building the DDG(X), a new destroyer that would replace the last of the cruisers and older Burke destroyers. But there’s no hard and fast timetable or budget.

Eyer was in the Navy for 27 years. When asked if he thought DDG(X) would become a reality, he ran through the pros and cons, then added, “Right now, I do not know.”

Richard Tsong-Taatarii / The Minnesota Star Tribune / TNS

Leonard Peltier, under supervised release, at his home in Belcourt, N.D, on Saturday, with one of his paintings hanging on the wall.

Leonard Peltier, now mostly free, navigates a new life on the outside

By KIM HYATT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

BELCOURT, N.D. — It's been six months since Leonard Peltier walked out of prison, and the first family reunion he could attend in 50 years went on without him over the weekend.

Relatives expected him, and said they were disappointed the 80-year-old patriarch didn't show. Instead, Peltier nostalgically cruised the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, telling stories about pretty girls and fast cars. He got takeout chicken, watched CNN and called Willie Nelson's ex-wife to catch up.

A few miles down the road, relatives from across the country shared a potluck and played games. Peltier drove past the gathering and didn't stop. Family called him on speaker phone and delivered him plates of food.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) activist said he didn't attend "for personal reasons." Accusations of theft have caused a rift between him and a sibling. Peltier is also in pain from a recent fall at home and needs a walker again after regaining enough strength to ditch his cane.

He is aging, partly blind and navigating a completely different world than the late 1970s, when he received consecutive life sentences for the killings of two FBI agents. Like in prison, he is learning who to trust. Out of prison, he sees people didn't forget him like he feared. In fact, there's a premium on his name, image and likeness. People want to write books, make documentaries, have him appear at events.

Peltier continues his activism, as much an octogenarian can. He renamed AIM to the American Indigenous Movement, and said his biggest concern in Indian Country is an epidemic of overdoses and addiction exploited by drug traffickers.

"Everybody thinks because I'm out, I'm going to be the savior and know how to stop all that stuff," he said. "There's only one way I can think of, and I don't want to be a serial killer. No, I don't want to be a killer period."

Controversial release

In a surprise move, ex-President Joe Biden granted Peltier clemency to indefinite house arrest in the last days of his presidency. It doesn't erase his conviction, later reduced on appeal from murder to aiding and abetting murder.

People either think Peltier is "the epitome of evil," said FBI Director Kash Patel, or a political prisoner symbolizing the injustice to and resistance of Native Americans. But not all in Indian Country celebrated his release, namely family of murdered AIM member Anna Mae Aquash who remain suspicious of Peltier.

Aquash's killing and the FBI shootout both took place on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975. Peltier has maintained his innocence, but believed he would die in prison.

"It's like dying and going to heaven," he said of being home. "I'm out of that hole. I'm out of that dungeon. I'm out of that, I don't know what else to call it, but hell."

Yes, he's free, he said, "to a certain extent."

Rules of home confinement restrict Peltier to travel within a 100-mile radius to run errands and go to doctor appointments. Beyond that, he needs a furlough pass.

He got one earlier this summer to attend a sun dance ceremony on Pine Ridge. Peltier returned to say prayers and give tobacco.

"It brought all that belief back to me. Restored everything," he said. "Back to where I was before I went to prison."

So many visitors

Much of his time is spent on his porch, shirtless and catching a tan.

Visitors drop by from across the U.S. to have coffee. They laugh and cry, overwhelmed that he's out after decades of unanswered pleas for his release, from the pope to Mother Teresa.

Denied clemency and pardon requests fill dozens of boxes stacked in his garage. They contain FBI interviews and court records spanning his 49-year fight. Archivists will work to preserve the documents, said Holly Cook Macarro, a lobbyist who helped push for Peltier's commutation and continues overseeing his affairs. She said some 400 pounds of his mail stored in prison made it to Belcourt.

Macarro, of Red Lake Nation, worked with NDN Collective, an Indigenous rights organization based in South Dakota, to achieve clemency.

"We built on decades of work that people had done. We were, I think, in the right place at the right time to help bring it across the finish line," she said.

Her husband is the president of the National Congress of American Indians. Deb Haaland, the first Indigenous Cabinet secretary to serve under Biden, was a big supporter. (Haaland's 2026 campaign poster for New Mexico governor hangs in Peltier's bedroom.)

"I got a beautiful home [NDN] bought me," Peltier said. "A nice, big yard. ... Lots of visitors. They all come and always offer me something, whatever I need."

He still has nightmares that he's back in prison and battles paranoid thoughts. He soon will install a security fence. He wants two German shepherds. But more than anything, he wants a companion. He's always teasing and flirting with women.

"I figured the right one will come along eventually, hopefully not too long. I am 80," he said. He turns 81 on Sept. 12.

Reunification

His absence at the family reunion reopened fresh wounds for relatives who got little access when he was released.

On that bitter cold homecoming Feb. 18, hundreds of relatives and activists greeted him as he crossed the reservation line for a celebration at the casino. Everyone wanted a moment, a photo, to gift him a quilt or tobacco.

Family say they know that Peltier doesn't just belong to them, but the world. Still many felt sidelined then – and now.

He told one of his daughters to not come to North Dakota for the reunion. Stubborn like her father, Marquetta Peltier, 52, hopped on a bus from Kansas anyway at the insistence of other relatives to be there and see her dad.

"We have to forgive and move forward. We're repairing 50 years of damage to our family," she said. "It's going to take time."

She was a baby when her dad went to prison. After he relocated to the Leavenworth penitentiary in 1985, she moved to Kansas to visit often. He was relocated to Florida and visits were harder.

"Now I get to spend the rest of our lives together," she said, adding that she plans to move to North Dakota to be near him. "As a daughter, all I ever wanted was my dad."

Leonard Peltier's other daughter is dying from years of alcohol and drug abuse, which he described as "infuriating." He's visited her in the hospital several times since his release.

Other relatives moved to Belcourt to care for Peltier only to be cut off. Some say they won't return again until Peltier's funeral.

RELEASE PELTIER
FREE PELTIER NOW!
FREE PELTIER NOW!
RISE UP

Anna Moneymaker / Getty Images / TNS

Activists participate in a protest to urge U.S. President Joe Biden to grant Native American activist Leonard Peltier clemency outside of the White House on Sept. 12, 2023, in Washington, D.C. Activists, who cite anti-Indigenous bias surrounding Peltier's trial, want the President to give leniency to Peltier who is serving two life sentences for the murder of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1975.

"He's my uncle. I still love him. Family's family. But I won't come back," said Pamela Bravo of Washington, who felt activists and documentary crews pushed family away at Peltier's homecoming.

Cousin Bev Moronez, of Fisher, Minn., said each visit with Peltier brings more understanding of his perspective: his stolen childhood in boarding school, his stolen health while incarcerated.

"He wasn't getting the medical care that he needed, and that's kind of hard to see someone deteriorate," she said.

Since his release, he's had multiple eye surgeries to no avail. He hopes the Mayo Clinic can improve his vision so he can drive again and paint.

He has two big safes in his house filled with his paintings that sell for thousands of dollars. His art behind bars helped pay for his legal defense fund, but he hasn't painted for five years, his acrylic paints and brushes untouched in a corner of the living room. He said he dreams of turning his garage into an artist studio.

When traveling on familiar roads with home health aides behind the wheel, he can sense when they're approaching his childhood home or the swimming hole he played in as a kid.

"Even though I'm half blind I still recognize it," he said.

Where white buffalo roam

A herd of rare white buffalo roam in Peltier's backyard, but he can't see them in the distance.

White buffalo, a symbol of hope and restoring spirituality, are deeply sacred in Native American culture, prophesizing good things to come. One in every 1 million buffalo calves born are white. A baker's dozen were born on Turtle Mountain in the last few years leading up to Peltier's release, so many they were gifted several to other tribes, like Red Lake Nation.

Ask about the white buffalo and Peltier's fading eyes twinkle.

"Whatever great mystery, you know, something's happening," he said. "So I feel honored that this happened. ... It's a big, big honor for us as a Native nation to have the white buffalo."

He recently took photos with them to make prints, he said, with plans to sell them like his paintings.

Andy Laverdure, 71, a respected elder and tribal judge whose spirit name is White Buffalo, said Peltier is his friend, but it's a stretch to say the births prophesized his return.

Turtle Mountain, he said, is the heartbeat of Turtle Island, aka North America. It's the geographic center visible from satellite.

The Creator sees the damage being done by boarding schools, the dysfunction of substance abuse, lying, stealing and "not trusting each other," he said, "and tearing families apart."

"It brought them here because they want to save us, and Creator wants us to live. That's why the buffalo are here," he said.

"Bringing Leonard home is healing. ... But it's bigger than that."

Kratom faces increasing scrutiny from states, the feds

By AMANDA HERNÁNDEZ
Stateline.org (TNS)

Katy Kildee / The Detroit News / TNS

Kratom is sold at smoke shops and some gas stations, often in the form of capsules, but the leaves can be smoked after being crushed or can be brewed with tea.

For years, state lawmakers have taken the lead on regulating kratom – the controversial herbal supplement used for pain relief, anxiety and opioid withdrawal symptoms. Some states have banned it entirely. Others have passed laws requiring age limits, labeling and lab testing.

At least half of the states and the District of Columbia have enacted some form of regulation on kratom or its components – building a patchwork of policies around a product largely unaddressed by the federal government.

But that may soon change. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is pushing to ban 7-hydroxymitragynine, or 7-OH – a powerful compound found in small amounts in kratom and sometimes concentrated or synthesized in products sold online, at smoke shops or behind gas station counters.

Federal health officials announced last month that the compound poses serious public health risks and should be classified as a Schedule I controlled substance, alongside heroin and LSD.

The move marks a significant shift in how federal regulators are approaching kratom, which they attempted to ban in 2016. It also has sparked debate about how the change could impact the growing 7-OH industry and its consumers.

This year, at least seven states have considered bills to tighten kratom regulations, including proposals for bans, age restrictions and labeling requirements.

Kratom, which originates from the leaves of a tree native to Southeast Asia, can have a wide range of mental and bodily effects, according to federal officials, addiction medicine specialists and kratom researchers. Reports of fatal kratom overdoses have surfaced in recent years, though kratom is often taken in combination with other substances.

Kratom and 7-OH are distinct products with separate markets, but they are closely connected. 7-OH is a semi-synthetic compound derived from kratom and only emerged on the market in late 2023, while kratom itself has been available for decades.

Leading kratom researchers also say more research is needed to fully understand the long-term effects of using both substances.

"There's much we don't know, unfortunately, on all sides," said Christopher R. McCurdy, a professor of medicinal chemistry at the University of Florida. McCurdy is a trained pharmacist and has studied kratom for more than 20 years.

Research suggests kratom may help with opioid withdrawal and doesn't seem to cause severe withdrawal on its own. Smaller amounts seem to act as a stimulant, while larger doses may have sedative, opioidlike effects. Very little is known about the risks of long-term use in humans, according to McCurdy.

As for 7-OH, it shows potential for treating pain, but it hasn't been studied in humans, and it may carry a high risk of addiction. Researchers don't yet understand how much is safe to take or how often it should be used, McCurdy told Stateline.

While some leading kratom experts agree that kratom and 7-OH should be regulated, they caution that placing 7-OH under a strict Schedule I classification would make it much harder to study – and argue it should instead be classified as Schedule II like some other opioids.

A federal survey from 2023 estimated that about 1.6 million Americans age 12 and older used kratom in the year before the study. The American Kratom Association, a national industry lobbying group, estimated in 2021 that between 11 million and 16 million Americans safely consume kratom products each year.

Since gaining popularity in recent years, 7-OH has appeared in a growing number of products. Some researchers and addiction medicine specialists say many consumers, especially those new to kratom, sometimes don't understand the difference between products.

"It's a pure opioid that's available without a prescription, so it's akin to having morphine or oxycodone for sale at a smoke shop or a gas station," McCurdy said. "This is a public health crisis waiting to happen."

Federal crackdown targets 7-OH, not kratom

In late July, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommended that the federal Drug Enforcement Administration place 7-OH in Schedule I, citing a high potential for abuse. The classification would not apply to kratom leaves or powders with naturally occurring 7-OH.

"We're not targeting the kratom leaf or ground-up kratom," FDA Commissioner Marty Makary said at a news conference. "We are targeting a concentrated synthetic byproduct that is an opioid."

Makary acknowledged that there isn't enough research or data to fully understand how widespread 7-OH's use or impact may be. Still, he said the Trump administration wants to be "aggressive and proactive" in addressing the issue before it grows into a larger public health problem.

While only small amounts of 7-OH occur naturally in the kratom plant, federal officials have raised concerns about U.S. products containing synthetic or concentrated forms of the compound because it's more potent than morphine and primarily responsible for kratom's opioidlike effects.

The FDA's recommendation to schedule 7-OH will now go to the DEA, which oversees the final steps of the process – including issuing a formal proposal and opening a public comment period.

If finalized, the rule could affect both companies selling enhanced kratom products and consumers in states where those products are currently legal.

The DEA backed off scheduling kratom compounds in 2016 after widespread public opposition.

Kirsten Smith, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Johns Hopkins University who is studying kratom's effects in humans, said she was surprised by the FDA's push to schedule 7-OH.

> **"There needs to be some kind of oversight, including some way of maybe helping to ensure that people know what they're getting."**
>
> **TERRENCE WALTON**
> Executive director and chief executive officer of NAADAC

"We don't really have a public health signal of a lot of adverse events for either kratom or for 7-OH at this time," she told Stateline. "I was, frankly, always surprised that kratom was pushed toward scheduling at an earlier time point. ... I don't know that we have data to support scheduling even now."

Still, some advocacy groups, including the Holistic Alternative Recovery Trust, argue the push to schedule 7-OH is driven more by corporate interests than public health, suggesting the kratom industry is trying to sideline competition from 7-OH products.

"We think that this is just happening because of the legacy kratom manufacturers losing market share and wanting to gin up a crisis with this," said Jeff Smith, the national policy director for the group, who said he has used 7-OH for sleep and pain management.

While his organization supports regulation and safe consumption, members worry the federal government's move could drive people to riskier substances or push the market underground.

"It's made a profound difference in my life," Smith said. "We think it would be tragic to cut it off based on such a paucity of data when there's so much potential for this product to help people."

Public health concerns

Federal health officials say a key concern is the growing use of kratom and 7-OH products among teens and young adults.

Some officials and addiction medicine specialists have pointed out that these products often come in flavors and packaging designed to appeal to younger buyers, with few controls over where or how they're sold. In some states without clear regulations, kratom and 7-OH products are available at gas stations or online, sometimes without any age verification.

"Whenever you go into a gas station and even though it's behind the glass, it's kind of eye level, and it has all of these bright colors – it has all of these things that really attract the visual of a kiddo," said Socorro Green, a prevention specialist with Youth180, a nonprofit focused on youth substance use prevention in Dallas.

Green added that kratom and 7-OH products may be even more accessible to young people in rural communities, where gas stations and convenience stores are often among the few available retailers.

Some researchers and experts say that certain products may not clearly or accurately disclose their 7-OH content and are sometimes marketed or mistaken for traditional kratom.

Some cities, counties and states have responded by banning kratom or raising the minimum purchase age to 18 or 21. But in many areas, enforcement remains inconsistent, and some addiction specialists say clearer federal and state guidance is needed – especially as more people are using kratom and 7-OH to manage pain, anxiety or withdrawal symptoms on their own.

"There needs to be some kind of oversight, including some way of maybe helping to ensure that people know what they're getting," said Terrence Walton, the executive director and chief executive officer of NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals.

State regulations

At least seven states have considered or enacted legislation this year related to kratom – ranging from age restrictions and labeling requirements to outright bans.

In New York, lawmakers passed two bills: one requiring warning labels and prohibiting kratom products from being labeled as "all natural," and another raising the minimum purchase age to 21. Neither has been sent to the governor.

In Colorado, a new measure, which was signed into law in May, prohibits kratom from being sold in forms that resemble candy or appeal to children, increases labeling requirements, limits concentrations of 7-OH, and bans the manufacture and distribution of synthetic or semi-synthetic kratom.

In Mississippi, a new law that took effect in July raised the minimum purchase age for kratom to 21. It also bans synthetic kratom extracts and products with high concentrations of 7-OH. Lawmakers in Montana and Texas introduced similar legislation this year, but neither proposal advanced.

Louisiana is the latest state to enact a kratom ban, which took effect Aug. 1. Meanwhile, in July, Rhode Island became the first state to reverse its ban. The new law establishes a regulatory framework for the manufacturing, sale and distribution of kratom products, set to take effect in April 2026.

As of this year, Washington, D.C., and seven states – Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Rhode Island (until April 2026), Vermont and Wisconsin – have banned kratom. At least half of U.S. states now regulate kratom or its components in some way.

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Despite federal shift, state health officials encourage COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant women

By NADA HASSANEIN
Stateline.org (TNS)

Heading into the respiratory illness season, states and clinicians are working to encourage pregnant patients to get COVID-19 vaccinations, even though the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services no longer recommends that they should.

Along with being older and having an underlying health condition, pregnancy itself is a risk factor. Pregnant women are more vulnerable to developing severe illness from COVID-19. They're also at high risk for complications, including preterm labor and stillbirth. The vast majority of medical experts say getting the shot is safe and effective – much safer than having the illness.

But HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced in May that the agency would no longer recommend that pregnant women get the vaccine. Before testifying before Congress in June, Kennedy circulated a document on Capitol Hill claiming higher rates of fetal loss after vaccination. But the authors of those studies told Politico that their work had been misinterpreted.

Experts say the federal shift puts the onus on state health agencies to ramp up vaccine guidance and outreach. Clinicians and public health organizations are trying to dispel misinformation and make sure information reaches low-income people and people of color, who had higher maternal death rates during the pandemic. During the first two years of the pandemic, the virus contributed to a quarter of maternal deaths, according to federal data.

"We are severely disappointed," said Dr. Neil Silverman, a professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the University of California, Los Angeles David Geffen School of Medicine. He has studied vaccines and pregnancy for the past 15 years and specializes in high-risk pregnancies.

Silverman called the federal shift a "public health tragedy on a grand scale."

Vaccinations against COVID-19 help prevent severe illness in pregnant people as well as their newborns, who are too young to get vaccinated, Silverman said. In what's called passive immunity, vaccinated mothers pass on antibodies to their babies through the placenta and through breast milk.

"State public health agencies are probably going to have to implement vaccine guidance that differs from the federal recommendations. And that's going to be an interesting can of worms," said OB-GYN Dr. Mark Turrentine, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Baylor College of Medicine in Texas.

Turrentine serves on a board of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists that focuses on immunization and infectious diseases. He said his recent pregnant patients who had COVID-19 hadn't gotten the vaccine.

"The change in guidance on the federal level just really makes a lot of confusion, and it makes it very challenging to try to explain to individuals why all of a sudden the difference," Turrentine said.

A slew of public health organizations have been making a concerted effort to dispel vaccine myths. They include the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization of maternal-fetal experts. At a news briefing the society held this month, clinicians stressed the safety and long-standing science behind COVID-19 vaccines, as well as the shots for RSV and the flu. Cases of RSV and the flu tend to peak in the winter months, while in recent years COVID-19 cases have spiked in the summer and the winter.

Dr. Brenna Hughes, an OB-GYN who chairs the organization's infectious diseases and emerging threats committee, pointed to survey data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing that less than a third of eligible pregnant patients received COVID-19 shots, and only 38 percent received RSV shots for the 2023 to 2024 season. Less than half – 47 percent – received flu shots, and 59 percent received TDAP (whooping cough) vaccines.

CDC data shows that for last year's and this year's season, only between 12 percent and 14 percent of pregnant patients got the COVID-19 vaccine.

"The complications from the infection are so much greater than the complications and the very few and typically minor adverse events that might occur from the vaccine," said microbiologist Sabra Klein, a professor of molecular microbiology and immunology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In June, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and 30 other professional health organizations signed a letter urging insurers to continue covering the COVID-19 shot for pregnant women, and have continued to urge coverage since then.

CVS Caremark, one of the nation's three major pharmacy benefit managers, told Stateline it will continue covering the vaccine for pregnant women. The Arizona, California and North Carolina state Medicaid agencies also told Stateline they are still currently covering COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant women.

Dr. Kimberly Fortner, president-elect of the Infectious Diseases Society for Obstetrics and Gynecology, said during the maternal-fetal medicine briefing that she hopes medical groups' joint messaging will bolster insurers.

"Hopefully by us linking arms, that can then help develop consistency so that insurers will continue to pay for the vaccine," she said.

Getty Images

Kids need soft skills in the age of AI

What does this mean for schools?

By JENNIFER L. STEELE
Professor of Education, American University (The Conversation)

For the past half-century, the jobs that have commanded the greatest earnings have increasingly concentrated on knowledge work, especially in science and technology.

Now with the spread of generative artificial intelligence, that may no longer be true. Employers are beginning to report their intent to replace certain white-collar jobs with AI. This raises questions over whether the economy will need as many creative and analytic workers, such as computer programmers, or support as many entry-level knowledge economy jobs.

This shift matters not just for workers but for K-12 teachers, who are accustomed to preparing students for white-collar work. Families, too, are concerned about the skills their children will need in an economy infused with generative AI.

As a professor of education policy who has studied AI's effect on jobs and a former K-12 teacher, I think the answer for teachers and families lies in understanding what AI cannot – and perhaps will not – be able to do.

Prior waves of automation replaced routine and manual jobs, boosting the earnings advantage of cognitively demanding work. But generative AI is different. It excels at pattern-matching in ways that allow it to simulate human coding, writing, drawing and data analysis, leaving the lower rungs of these occupations vulnerable to automation.

On the other hand, because its output mimics patterns in existing data, generative AI has a harder time handling complicated reasoning tasks, much less complex problems whose answers depend on many unknowns. Moreover, it has no understanding of how humans think and feel.

This means that the "soft skills" – attributes that allow people to interact well with others and to be attuned their own emotional states – are likely to be ascendant. That's because they are integral to solving complex problems and working with people. Though soft skills such as conscientiousness and agreeableness are considered to be personality traits, research suggests these are emotional tools that can be taught.

Photos from Getty Images

Teaching emotional awareness

The good news is that soft skills can be taught in tandem with traditional subjects such as math and reading – those areas for which teachers are held accountable – using techniques teachers already know.

For example, teachers often ask students to submit "exit tickets" as they depart the classroom at the end of a lesson. These are brief, written reflections or questions about the concepts students just learned.

Exit tickets can also be used to help students burnish their emotional and social skills along with their academic learning. In practice, teachers can give prompts that focus on moments of intellectual bravery, emotional regulation or interpersonal understanding, such as:

- Write about a time when you helped someone today.
- Tell me about someone who was kind to you today. How were they kind?
- Describe a time this week when you learned something that seemed very hard. How did you do it?

The point of the task is not just to boost students' mood or engagement, though these are great byproducts. The goal is to help students realize that their emotional responses to external circumstances fall within their control. Enhanced awareness of their own emotions predicts children's ability to manage frustration, to perceive and anticipate the emotions of others and to work smoothly with other people. All of these are vital workplace skills that will likely become more valuable with the rise of generative AI.

Teaching problem-solving

Teachers can also have students practice solving messy problems whose answers are not known. For example, as elementary students learn to calculate perimeters, areas or volumes, they can work in groups to find the measurements of objects around the school, including large or oddly shaped items. Teachers can prompt students to reflect not just on the correctness of their answers but on how they framed and approached each problem.

Real-world problem-solving, also known as authentic assessment, can be taught in any discipline, with examples that include:

- Testing the soil slopes and moisture levels on school grounds and proposing landscaping solutions.
- Creating and pilot-testing video campaigns for social causes.
- Reimagining how history might have played out if leaders had made different choices, and considering policy implications for today.

Teaching children to unpack complexity helps them understand the difference between seeking textbook answers versus testing possibilities when the best option is unknown. Solving novel, complex problems will continue to befuddle AI, not only because there are many steps and unknowns, but also because AI lacks our spatial and emotional understanding of the world. Even in the long term, countless variables that humans instinctively grasp will be difficult for computers to intuit.

Protecting slow learning

The technology complaint I hear most often from teachers is that students are having generative AI do their work for them. This happens not because students are deceptive or evil but because humans are self-regulating creatures. We take shortcuts on tasks that seem dull or too daunting in order to prioritize tasks that feel more rewarding.

But when students are building new skills, delegating work to AI is a huge mistake. By making slow things fast, AI undermines learning, because effort is needed to learn hard things.

For this reason, I think teachers must protect the classroom as a place where basic skills are learned slowly, alongside other students. For many lessons, this will mean harking back to the days before computers, in which students wrote assignments by hand or presented their work orally, learning to anticipate and respond to different viewpoints. If students are permitted to use digital automation tools, they should be prompted to reflect on how they used them, what they learned from them and which skills they weren't able to practice – such as spelling, long division or bibliography formatting – when they delegated work to the tool.

The soft skill to rule them all

The truth is no one knows exactly what will happen to workers in an AI-enabled economy. People disagree about the skills AI will complement or replace. But the skills that underpin modern technology, such as math and reading, will likely continue to matter, as will the intra- and interpersonal skills that make us distinctly human.

Perhaps the most important skill schools can teach children today is the self-awareness to prioritize learning over shortcuts, and to refrain from delegating work to machines until they know how to do it themselves. It will also become even more important to be able to work with others in order to unpack hard problems.

An AI-enabled society will not be a society in which complex problems simply disappear. Even as the labor market reorders itself, I believe opportunities will abound for those who can work well with others to tackle the great challenges that lie ahead.

Jennifer L. Steele is a professor of education at American University.

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

Treatments for amblyopia (lazy eye)

Eye patching, drops, digital therapies and more

By ENIOLAMI O. DOSUNMU, MD, MPH, FAAO, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

Amblyopia, also known as "lazy eye," is a common eye condition in kids that develops when a child has an eye that does not see well. This is caused by a poor connection between the eye to the brain, which can happen for a variety of different reasons. Amblyopia is more common in one eye but can also happen in both eyes.

To restore normal vision in the affected eye, it is important to detect amblyopia as early as possible and treat it properly. If the problem continues too long, past a certain age, vision is often lost permanently.

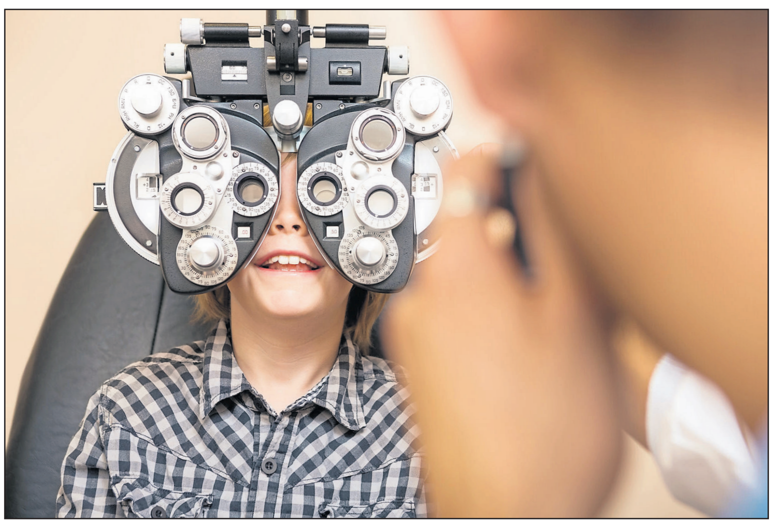
Amblyopia can develop in different ways, but all involve the brain not getting clear, balanced input from both eyes.

There are several different types of amblyopia. Strabismic amblyopia occurs when one eye is not lined up with the other. The eye could be turned inward, outward, upward or downward. When the two eyes do not see the same thing, the moving or wandering eye will lose vision.

Another type of amblyopia, deprivation amblyopia, happens when there is something within the visual pathway that limits vision such as a cataract or ptosis (droopy) eyelid. When one eye needs glasses to function properly, this is called refractive amblyopia. The brain will not be able to form a proper image if the information it receives from the eye is out of focus, and the eye develops amblyopia.

Glasses are a common corrective treatment for amblyopia, especially in cases of bilateral (both eyes) refractive amblyopia, and for unilateral refractive amblyopia.

Once an ophthalmologist diagnoses the problem in the weaker eye, your child may need to wear a patch over the "good" eye for periods of time. This forces them to use and strengthen the eye that has become "lazy." Patching therapy will continue for as long as necessary to bring the weaker eye up to its full potential and keep it there. This could take weeks, months or even a few years.



Dreamstime / TNS

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As an alternative to an eye patch, the ophthalmologist might prescribe eye drops or ointment to blur the vision in the good eye and force the weaker eye to work and be strengthened. This can stimulate your child to use the amblyopic eye. Like patching, this could take an extended period before treatment is completed.

There are newer treatments for amblyopia. These treatments use digital technology to focus on both eyes.

Luminopia uses a virtual reality platform where the image seen by the stronger eye is altered. This allows for the weaker eye to improve vision. Curesight uses an eye tracking platform and special glasses that affect the central vision of the stronger eye, allowing for the weaker eye to improve.

Both have been proven effective in amblyopia treatment but cost may be a limiting factor for these treatments, since they may not be covered by all insurance plans.

Surgery can be used along with the therapies listed above to treat amblyopia but it cannot be the only treatment used. For example, surgery to remove a cataract may be needed for deprivation amblyopia, along with glasses and eyepatch wearing.

An examination with a pediatric ophthalmologist will be helpful as you make decisions on amblyopia treatment for your child.

Eniolami O. Dosunmu, MD, MPH, FAAO, FAAP, is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Section on Ophthalmology. She is also an Associate Professor of Ophthalmology at the Abrahamson Pediatric Eye Institute, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, and the University of Cincinnati.

PARENTING STRATEGIES ARE SHIFTING

Neuroscience brings the developing brain into clearer focus

By NANCY L. WEAVER
Saint Louis University (The Conversation)

A friend offhandedly told me recently, “It’s so easy to get my daughter to behave after her birthday – there are so many new toys to take away when she’s bad!”

While there is certainly an appeal to such a powerful parenting hack, the truth is that there’s a pretty big downside to parenting with punishments.

For about the past two decades, scientists have been discovering more and more about the growing brain. This exploration of neurobiology has led to new types of trauma treatments, a deeper understanding of the nervous system and an appreciation of how environmental and genetic factors interact to shape a child’s behavior.

As the science has become increasingly actionable, more evidence-based strategies are spilling into parenting and educational programs. Research offers some useful guideposts for how parents and caregivers can change our adult ways to foster healthy child development.

It turns out that many old-school parenting and educational approaches based on outdated behavioral models are not effective, nor are they best-practice, particularly for the most vulnerable children.

Why old-school methods fall short

I don’t come to this view lightly. I’m a behavioral scientist and a professor of public health with degrees in mathematics and biostatistics. When my children were little, I read all the parenting books and applied a somewhat academic strategy to my job of parenting. I firmly endorsed conventional recommendations from authors and pediatricians: I dutifully sent my children to their rooms to think about their choices and dug in my heels to enforce consequences.

It wasn’t until my children reached middle school and high school ages that I began to see what my approach to discipline was costing us.

Parents and educators have long espoused principles gleaned from experiments by the 20th-century researcher B.F. Skinner, a behavioral psychologist who studied how rewards and punishments could change the behavior of rats, resulting in the classic carrot and stick, reward and discipline strategies. Simply put, rats that behaved the way the researchers wanted – by pressing a lever – were given a treat, and rats that did not were given a light shock.

These midcentury, rat-based experiments shaped a parenting approach that caught on in American culture and quickly became dogma. Generations of parents learned to use rewards such as sticker charts, trinkets or toys, or an extra bedtime story to reinforce the behaviors they hoped to see more of, and to use negative reinforcement such as timeouts and loss of privileges to reduce unwanted behaviors.

But beginning in the early 2000s, many high-profile authors began to theorize that these strategies were not only ineffective but also potentially harmful.

The neuroscience of child behavior

We all have a built-in nervous system response that prepares us for “fight or flight” when we feel that our safety is threatened. When we sense danger for whatever reason, our heart beats faster, our palms sweat and our focus narrows. In these situations, our prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for rational decision-making and reasoning – is decommissioned while our body prepares to fend off the threat. It’s not until our threat response subsides that we can begin to think more clearly with our prefrontal cortex. This is particularly true for kids.

Unlike adults who have usually acquired some ability to regulate their nervous system states, a child has both an immature nervous system and an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. A child may hit his friend with a toy truck because he’s unable to manage the scary feelings of being left out of the kickball game. He likely knows better, but in the face of this threat his survival brain responds with a “fight” response, and reasoning shuts down as his prefrontal cortex takes awhile to get “back online.” Because he is not yet able to verbalize his needs, caregivers need to interpret those needs by observing the behavior.

After coregulating with a calm adult – essentially syncing up with their nervous system – a young child is able to return to a calm state and then process any learning. Efforts to change a child’s behavior in a moment of stress, including by punishments and timeouts, miss an opportunity for developing emotional regulation skills and often prolong the distress.

The behaviorist models just don’t work very well for children. The growing understanding of children’s developing brains makes clear that punishing a child for a temper tantrum or for “misbehaving” by grabbing a toy from a classmate makes no more sense than lecturing a man in cardiac arrest about eating less sugar.

Curiosity is the key to connection

Scientists and parenting experts have come a long way toward understanding how brain science can inform child-raising.

While researchers may not all agree on the most effective parenting style, there is general agreement that showing curiosity about kids’ feelings, behaviors, reactions and choices can help to guide parents’ approach during stressful times. Understanding more about why a child didn’t complete their math sheet, or why a toddler threw sand at their cousin, can support real learning.

Attuning with our children by understanding their nervous system responses helps kids feel a sense of safety, which then allows them to absorb feedback. Children who feel this connection and build these skills are much less likely to throw trucks.

For instance, when your child fusses for candy in the checkout line at the grocery store, instead of taking away the afternoon trip to the park, try this instead:

- Stay grounded. A deep breath and a pause signals to your own nervous system to be calmer, which allows you to coregulate with a fussing child.
- Be available. Staying close gives your child the support they need to weather the difficult emotion. Validating a child’s experience can go a long way toward helping them reset to a more regulated state.
- Hold a boundary. By not giving in to the candy purchase, you help your child practice how to handle the emotion of anger and disappointment – called “distress tolerance” – with your support.
- Reflect on the circumstances. After everyone is calmer, you can talk about that experience and also notice the circumstances. Was your child hungry or tired, or perhaps upset about something from their day?

Parenting with the understanding of a child’s developing brain is much more effective in shaping children’s behavior and paves the way for emotional growth for everyone, as well as stronger parent-child relationships, which are enormously protective.

And that definitely feels better than taking away their birthday presents.

Nancy L. Weaver is a professor of behavioral science at Saint Louis University.

FINANCE

Eamesbot / Dreamstime / TNS

While keeping an emergency savings fund is important, if you're working with a tight budget, it may not be easy for you to put aside a few thousand dollars. In fact, nearly a quarter (24 percent) of Americans say they have no emergency savings, according to Bankrate's Emergency Savings Report.

Nearly 1 in 4 Americans have zero emergency savings – these under-the-radar strategies can help

By LANE GILLESPIE
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Try as we might to avoid it, sudden, expensive emergencies can happen to anyone. A pet might need an unexpected vet visit, your car might need a replacement part or you may experience a layoff. That's where emergency savings come in: By keeping a savings fund that you only use for emergencies, you can have peace of mind knowing you can tackle any big expense that comes your way.

While keeping an emergency savings fund is important, if you're working with a tight budget, it may not be easy for you to put aside a few thousand dollars. In fact, nearly a quarter (24 percent) of Americans say they have no emergency savings, according to Bankrate's Emergency Savings Report.

Americans have struggled to save for years – since 2011, the percentage of people without emergency savings has bounced between 21 percent and 29 percent, according to Bankrate's Emergency Savings Report, which has tracked people's emergency savings habits for 14 years. But rising prices since 2022 have made it even harder to save money. While the inflation rate has fallen since its 2022 high, Americans are still struggling with the price of their everyday purchases. Several years of rising prices have led to Americans paying 24.3 percent more for consumer goods since February 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began in the U.S., according to a Bankrate analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data.

Inflation wouldn't sting as much if Americans received yearly pay raises to match, but wages over the last year haven't grown fast enough to beat inflation, according to Bankrate's Wage to Inflation Index. If your income has been stagnant and your everyday expenses are growing more expensive, you'll have limited funds left over to stash away for savings.

Without emergency savings, you may need to turn to credit cards or borrow money in a pinch, and that's what many Americans are doing when in financial need. A quarter (25 percent) of Americans would use a credit card to pay for an unexpected $1,000 emergency expense and pay it off over time, according to December 2024 data from Bankrate's Emergency Savings Report. With credit card interest rates being over 20 percent, paying off an emergency expense with a credit card over time will cost you significantly more due to interest charges.

Snowballing economic factors are making it harder to save, especially for younger generations

In a perfect world, you would save at least 20 percent of your income across retirement accounts, emergency savings and other savings accounts. That's part of the "50/30/20" rule, which advises you to spend 50 percent of your income on necessities, 30 percent on wants and 20 percent on savings. However, many people are likely to be spending a lot more than 50 percent of their income on necessities – squeezing the amount they can save.

Consumer prices rose 2.7 percent year-over-year in June, according to the BLS – the highest annual inflation rate since February. Americans are also squeezed on housing: Nearly half of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income alone on housing costs, according to the BLS. Similarly, 27 percent of homeowners pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs, according to product research company Chamber of Commerce.

Add in transportation costs and the rising cost of groceries, and you may easily find yourself cutting into your savings to afford necessities.

While many Americans, regardless of age, are struggling to save money, younger generations today are facing additional stressors that are making saving even more difficult. The labor market is showing signs of weakening, and recent college graduates are particularly struggling to find work as companies slow down on hiring and as AI swallows up entry-level white-collar jobs, according to the Wall Street Journal. What's more, their spending on non-essentials hasn't slowed down. Gen Zers (ages 18-28) are the most likely generation to spend more on travel, dining out and live entertainment year-over-year, according to Bankrate's Discretionary Spending Survey.

Now, Gen Zers and millennials (ages 29-44) are more likely than older generations to have no emergency savings, according to Bankrate's Emergency Savings Report:

Americans who have no emergency savings in 2025

- Gen Zers (ages 18-28): 34 percent
- Millennials (ages 29-44): 28 percent
- Gen Xers (ages 45-60): 24 percent
- Baby boomers (ages 61-79): 16 percent

The youngest American adults will likely always have less savings than older generations, since they're relatively newer to saving. But younger Americans are starting their savings journeys today with added financial barriers that previous generations didn't face to the same extent. Today's young adults are kicking off their careers with fewer job prospects and high prices. This can take a toll – 46 percent of Gen Zers say money negatively impacts their mental health, at least occasionally, according to Bankrate's Money and Mental Health Survey. This stress has also led to many Gen Zers feeling that planning for their future is pointless, according to CNBC. Without the motivation – or the funds – to save money, more Gen Zers year-over-year have no emergency savings, according to Bankrate:

Americans with no emergency savings, 2024

- Gen Zers: 29 percent
- Millennials: 34 percent
- Gen Xers: 31 percent
- Baby boomers: 16 percent

How to start – and maintain – an emergency fund when high prices make it harder to save

No matter your age, if you haven't already started saving, it's vital to start now, even if it's only $10 or $20 a month. Building savings is a muscle you need to train – it may be difficult at first, but you'll be glad to see your progress later.

1. Identify your 'survival number'

An emergency savings fund should have at least three to six months of expenses stashed away, which is enough to cover most emergencies, like a job loss, car repair or emergency room bill. Saving this amount can be intimidating, but it's more attainable than it seems.

If you spend $4,000 a month on recurring expenses, such as your rent, utilities, phone bill, groceries and transportation, that doesn't actually mean you need to save $12,000 to $24,000 in your emergency savings fund. Your emergency fund can be based on your "survival number," or the minimum amount of expenses you need to survive.

"Every few months or so, I like to go through my budget and identify my six-month survival number," says Bankrate U.S. Economy Reporter Sarah Foster, who has tracked U.S. wages and inflation for the past several years. "That means including things like rent, utilities and groceries – not nice-to-have extras like streaming subscriptions or monthly facials and manicures. This number usually looks different from my regular budget, and that's the point. It makes the goal feel more realistic."

To know your survival number, check your budget and split your expenses into two categories: necessities and non-necessities. Necessities will include your:

- Rent or mortgage
- Utilities, phone and internet
- Insurance and health care copays
- Loan payments, such as a car loan, minimum credit card payments and student loans
- Basic groceries, household supplies and pet food
- Transportation costs

Non-necessities will include everything else, including subscriptions, eating and drinking out, personal grooming expenses, hobbies and more – everything you're able to cut if you lose your job or otherwise need to fall back on your savings.

If you spend $4,000 a month on recurring expenses, you might realize you only spend $3,000 a month on necessities. That means you only need to save $9,000 to $18,000 in your emergency savings fund, which is much more attainable.

2. Start with a savings sprint

If you want to start saving for emergencies, you may need to cut down on spending to make room in your budget. But it can be challenging to suddenly cut down on everyday luxuries like ordering coffee out or getting your nails done.

The good news is, you don't need to cut out luxuries permanently. To give yourself a head start on your savings, consider a savings sprint. Try cutting out non-essential expenses for a set period of time, such as four or six weeks. Set a savings goal, such as $500, that you can reasonably meet in that time by cutting out non-essentials. Set that money aside in a separate savings account – and don't touch it.

When the savings sprint timeframe is up, you can go back to spending money on non-essentials – but use that time to figure out what is important for you to spend money on. For example, if after the sprint is up, you realize you actually don't miss spending money on coffee shops, you can continue funneling that money toward your savings.

It can be hard to find the motivation to keep saving if you are only putting aside a small amount each month. However, a savings sprint gives you a jump start on your emergency savings, providing a motivational boost to watch your savings grow.

3. Make your bank account work for you

You can open a basic savings account at most banks where you keep your main checking account. But keeping your checking and savings accounts close together can make it all too easy to dip into your savings for non-emergencies.

Instead, try opening a savings account with a separate bank from the one where you keep your checking account. It takes several days to transfer funds between most banks, which will discourage you from dipping into your emergency savings too easily.

Any savings account will work to stash your savings, but you might want to consider a high-yield savings account (HYSA), which will offer a higher interest rate than a traditional savings account, which will help your savings grow even faster.

Also, try auto-depositing your savings directly into the account (also known as paying yourself first). By remaining hands-off, it'll be easier to maintain your new savings habit.

You can keep your savings in one lump sum in a savings account, but some banks today allow you to go one step further. You can split up your funds into savings buckets, meaning you can assign roles to your funds:

Savings buckets let you know where your savings are going by separating them according to your goals, such as an emergency fund, travel fund or house down payment. Not only does this allow you to avoid touching your emergency funds when withdrawing money for a vacation, it serves as a constant reminder of the reasons why you're saving in the first place.

The bottom line

Saving money isn't always easy, but it's vital for your financial health. If you don't feel like you have enough room in your budget to save, consider cutting expenses where you can by examining your subscriptions, setting spending limits and cutting down on unnecessary spending. Or, you can try selling unwanted possessions or even picking up a side hustle.

Key takeaways

- Nearly a quarter of Americans don't have an emergency savings fund. If you're one of them, that puts you at risk of taking on significant debt.
- It can be challenging to start and maintain an emergency savings fund. Determining the minimum you need to save and starting with a savings sprint can help.
- Opening a high-yield savings account will help you grow your savings without the temptation to use the funds for day-to-day spending.

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Earnings Statement
Earnings
Reg Salary
Rate
Hours
This Period
2,237.06
Year-to
2,237
Deductions
Taxes
This Period
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Total-to

Gary Arbach / Dreamstime / TNS

Four years after inflation first spiked, Americans' wages are still falling behind.

Four years after inflation first spiked, Americans' wages are still falling behind – and a slower job market isn't helping

By SARAH FOSTER
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Three years ago, when inflation was rising at the fastest pace in almost half a century, Lori Schkufza could still see the silver linings. She had a full-time job with benefits as a digital animator. Even though her expenses had grown, her income had increased, too.

Now, however, the 38-year-old Buffalo, New York, resident has been out of a job for more than a year. Looking for income, she's turned to freelancing, but she's accepting jobs at a lower rate than she feels she should be charging based on her decade-plus of experience. All that, and she says she still feels the same sticker shock each time she comes home from a trip to the grocery store.

"I have no bargaining power. If I don't do the job, there are countless people who are willing to do it for less. It feels like a race to the bottom," she said. "Right now, I'm not seeing any trade-offs."

Those "trade-offs" – as she puts it – were the complicated bargain many Americans faced as the economy roared back from the pandemic. Jobs were abundant, and wages were rising at a rapid pace. But so were prices, for everything from rent and gas to utilities and groceries.

Four years after prices first surged, Americans may still be in the hole. The latest wage to inflation gap stands at -1.2 percentage points, according to Bankrate's Wage To Inflation Index, indicating that paychecks haven't quite kept up with price increases over the past four years.

Bankrate's index is designed to answer a question government data doesn't fully address: Have paychecks kept pace with inflation? A positive reading means wages are gaining ground on prices, boosting purchasing power. A negative reading means the opposite: even with bigger paychecks, workers can afford less than they could back then.

The index reflects the trajectory of wages and prices since the start of 2021, when the economy reopened from the pandemic and inflation began surging. Prices have risen 22.7 percent since then, while wages have grown 21.5 percent (lagging prices by 1.2 percentage points) over the same period, according to Bankrate's analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data from the consumer price index (CPI) and employment cost index (ECI).

Wages are catching up to inflation, but progress has slowed

For years now, many workers have weighed whether their bigger paychecks were worth the higher bills. Half of adults (50 percent) told Bankrate in a 2023 survey that their overall financial situation had gotten worse since the 2020 presidential election.

Even today, as inflation has slowed, over half of Americans (56 percent) say the U.S. economy is on the wrong track, according to Bankrate's Consumer Sentiment Survey. One in 4 (26 percent) say it's on the right track and 17 percent say they don't know.

"A wage increase is something you earn. Inflation is something that happens to you," said Martha Gimbel, executive director of the Yale Budget Lab. "It feels unfair to people that their hard-earned wage increase is getting eaten up by something that's not their fault."

The gap between wages and inflation has been closing, as paychecks continue rising faster than inflation. Back in the second quarter of 2022, the gap stood as wide as -4.8 percentage points, when prices had risen 12.6 percent since the beginning of 2021 versus a 7.8 percent increase in wages.

But Schkufza's story illustrates an emerging roadblock in Americans' ongoing recovery of their purchasing power: a slowing job market.

As many stay in their current jobs and companies pull back on hiring, wage growth has cooled off. Paychecks rose 3.5 percent between the second quarters of 2023 and 2024, down from a 4.1 percent pace in the prior-year period. Meanwhile, prices are up 2.7 percent over the same period, down slightly from a 3 percent increase the year before.

"There were challenges associated with the rapid wage growth that we saw a couple years ago," said Tara Sinclair, a George Washington University economics professor and the former deputy assistant secretary for macroeconomics at the Treasury Department. "But on the other hand, people are now looking back at that time relatively fondly. They remember when they were getting raises. The grass is always greener, and people always want faster wage gains."

If those trends continue, workers' paychecks will fully catch back up to total post-pandemic inflation by the third quarter of 2026, according to Bankrate's projections.

Hotter inflation from tariffs could threaten Americans' progress, too

Economists and Federal Reserve officials alike are also on edge about inflation becoming a problem again, as President Donald Trump lifts tariffs to the highest level since the Great Depression.

"They may be less than people estimate or more than people estimate, but they will never be zero," Fed Chair Jerome Powell said in July, referring to tariff-driven cost increases. Someone will have to pay for these higher import taxes down the line, he continued. That could be the retailer, the company, the importer or the exporter – but it could also be American consumers.

Even if retailers refrain from fully passing along those higher import taxes, Americans could still pay the price – especially if companies pull back on compensation or wage hikes as a way to eat the cost, according to Laura Ullrich, director of economic research at the Indeed Hiring Lab and a former economist at the Richmond Fed.

"They (consumers) might not accept much, if any, price increase," Ullrich said. "If they don't, then the business has to figure out how to absorb that tariff while trying to maintain profit margins. Compensation is certainly part of that equation."

These are the industries where pay has kept with inflation

Not all workers have lost ground to inflation.

Wages are outpacing total pandemic-era inflation in four industries: retail trade (where the gap stands at +0.5 percentage point), health care and social assistance (+1.7 percentage point), leisure and hospitality (+4.1 percentage points) and food services and accommodation (+4.8 percentage points).

In those industries, workers are still in demand. Almost 6 out of every 10 (or 58 percent) of jobs created over the past 12 months were in health care and social assistance, while roughly 16 percent of jobs came from leisure and hospitality, which includes food services.

"Any price is a function of supply and demand," Gimbel said. For wage growth, "it's a function of how much people are willing to supply that thing and how much people are demanding of that thing."

Gaps are widest in manufacturing (-2.5 percentage points), professional and business services (-2.8 percentage points), financial activities (-3.4 percentage points), construction (-3.6 percentage points) and education (-4.8 percentage points).

Workers in white-collar financial activities or professional and business services have encountered a slower pace of hiring. At the same time, the U.S. economy has fewer manufacturing jobs today than it did 12 months ago.

"We're no longer in the 'workers in control' phase seen a few years ago when job openings vastly outnumbered unemployed jobseekers," Hamrick said. "Raises are more modest, and many firms are more cautious, even if they're not laying people off."

Hoping to get a raise this year?

Here are 4 key tips – from the economists and workers navigating today's job market

Workers have been accustomed to their pay growing over time, and their paychecks are lower today than they would've been, had the pandemic not disrupted the U.S. economy at all, according to Sinclair. But even with those disruptions, pay rising as rapidly as it did after the worst recession since the Great Depression is "remarkable," she says. Stimulus checks, scaled-up unemployment benefits and ultra-low interest rates helped the labor market recover faster than it typically does after a recession.

"Suppose the government had not responded so dramatically to supporting people's incomes during the pandemic," Sinclair said. "How many fewer jobs would we have gotten? How much less inflation would we have gotten? And would people have liked that outcome better? We'll never really know how people would've felt about that."

If you're hoping to find a better-paying job, negotiate for a raise or earn more pay this year in general, here's what both economists – and jobseekers – recommend.

1. Focus on upskilling and bringing value to your organization

In today's cooler job market, job-hopping no longer guarantees a bigger paycheck. Wage gains for job switchers and job stayers are nearly identical, as companies scale back on how many workers they're looking to hire, according to the Atlanta Fed's wage growth tracker.

Workers are also more likely to receive a performance-based pay increase than a cost-of-living adjustment, according to Bankrate's latest Pay Raise Survey.

Taken together, those shifts suggest workers might have better leverage if they learn how to demonstrate the value of their work and how it adds to their company's profitability.

"Top performers, in the right roles, will always stand out and be the exception to the rule," Hamrick says. "Positive results are your strongest bargaining chip. By being a star on your team, higher pay, as a retention tool, is a more likely result. It's also about rewarding what's been achieved."

2. Rely on your personal connections and networking

Hiring has slowed to its lowest pace since 2013, according to the Labor Department. Yet, there were still 7.4 million job openings as of June 2025, a sign that opportunities exist, even if they're harder to come by. Networking, building connections with people in your industry and keeping in touch with prior business contacts could be one way to help you stand out from others in the pile.

3. Stay patient, and keep track of your personal finances

Job hunts are taking longer and longer. One in four unemployed workers has now been jobless for more than six months, Labor Department data shows.

"The economy has ups and downs, and different sectors have ups and downs," Ullrich said. "There's a temporary nature to much of this, but how long that will last is quite uncertain. Patience is going to be key."

While you wait, your financial buffers can make or break your ability to stay selective. An emergency fund, for example, can help you avoid having to take a lower-paying job or a position you don't like, just to bring in some income.

Most experts recommend setting aside at least six months' worth of expenses in a liquid and accessible savings account. Look closely at your budget and find expenses you can trim, then funnel that extra money into your safety net.

4. Think about your "you" factor

In a competitive job market – where AI may be making it easier for workers to mass-apply and companies keep getting flooded with candidates to fill fewer open positions – authenticity may be what helps you rise above the noise.

Take it from Schkufza, who says she is embracing her bold creative identity as a selling point.

"I've definitely changed my outreach and the way I sell myself," she said. "If you want something that's super sleek and perfectly polished, that is not me. But if you want to be brash and sometimes garish, that's what you'll get from me. Now is the moment to not play it safe. If everything is on fire, now is the time to take a chance and really go off the beaten path and just do something completely different."

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FOOD

Grilled chicken, bruschetta and peach crisp

By GRETCHEN McKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

This easy budget entree features chicken grilled with summer vegetable in a foil packet.

As we look forward to fall colors and football, it's not a bad idea to squeeze in a few last meals cooked on the grill and served al fresco.

Cooking and eating outdoors always puts people in a better mood. That's especially true when the menu is hyper-seasonal. There's something so special about enjoying foods that are only available for a few months or weeks each year – not just because they're flavorful, but also because they support local farmers. Often, they're also more affordable.

With that in mind, I decided to take advantage of both the good weather and all the produce being harvested at its peak ripeness for my latest installment in the PG's ongoing budget dinners series.

The main attraction on this week's menu: a grilled chicken and vegetable entree that's so simple to prepare that you'll have time to make a homemade dessert. Start to finish, the dish takes only about 25 minutes once the grill is ready, and because all the ingredients are conveniently cooked together in tidy foil packets, there's very little cleanup.

Chicken cooked over charcoal often is slathered in barbecue sauce before serving. In this recipe, the boneless breasts are nestled in an aluminum foil "boat" filled with sliced summer squash and cherry tomatoes, then topped with a tangy mustard sauce. The veggies steam as the chicken cooks, and everything comes out moist and tender.

"Hobo meals," as these foil packets are sometimes called by campers, are great because they're as versatile as they are easy. If you don't like zucchini, substitute peppers, onions, carrots or whatever you like. For faster cooking, you also can cube the chicken into bite-sized pieces.

This three-course meal for four also includes my Americanized version of one of Italy's most famous appetizers – a savory bruschetta – that shines a well-deserved light on the exceptional flavor of heirloom tomatoes and fresh basil.

Finally, there's the peach dessert that you can pop in the oven while the chicken sizzles on the grill. After all, who doesn't love finishing a meal with something sweet and crunchy?

Crisps – a dish of baked, jammy fruit topped with a crumbly mixture of oatmeal, sugar and butter – never fail to hit the spot, especially when they're topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. They're also relatively simple to prepare, which is a beautiful thing for those who don't bake on a regular basis.

Total cost of this late-summer, nutritious meal for a family of four: $25.23, or just $6.30 per person. I overspent my budget of $25 by a quarter, but hey, just try getting an entire dinner at a fast-food joint for the same price that's not loaded with unhealthy fats, sodium and calories.

So how did we do it?

For starters, I thoughtfully planned a menu to avoid impulse purchases or buying items I already had in my pantry or refrigerator. Then, I took advantage of the low prices you often find at farmers markets.

All of my veggies, in fact, were purchased from local farmers for far less than what I normally would pay for out-of-season produce at the grocery store. Everything from the summer squash ($1 each) to the tomatoes ($4 for a pint of cherries or 50 cents for each heirloom) to the shallots ($7 for a box of seven), basil ($1.50 for a huge bunch) and peaches (60 cents each).

I also paid only $4 for the loaf of ciabatta on which the bruschetta was built, and had enough left over for toast the next morning. That's a bargain.

As for the chicken, rather than a famous national brand, I chose the one with the grocery store label that was on sale.

I'll admit it takes some planning to create flavorful, complete meals that get the most bang for your buck. It also often requires ferreting through your fridge and pantry before you head to the store – with list and pen – to see what needs to be used up.

Even committed shoppers don't always follow that cardinal rule of looking before buying: When my refrigerator broke earlier this summer, I found four jars of sun-dried tomatoes in oil on a back shelf along with multiple half-eaten jars of pickles, several dried-out lemons and a moldy plastic container of sour cream.

Other tips for smart shopping and meal budgeting: Look for sales, compare unit prices, buy in bulk if it makes sense (it doesn't always!) and use coupons. Also, never shop while hungry – it's so easy to reach for a high-priced, unhealthy junk food on an empty stomach! (My weakness is Zapp's Voodoo potato chips.)

The menu that follows is designed for four, but depending on who's eating, it may serve more. You'll definitely have enough peach crisp left over for breakfast the next morning!

Bruschetta

When vine-ripened local tomatoes are (finally!) in season, I eat them almost every day in sandwiches, on toast and tossed with a little olive oil and vinegar as a salad. But my favorite way to enjoy the fruit is as bruschetta.

Traditionally, marinated tomatoes are simply piled onto toasted or grilled bread, but I like to slice and fry mine in a little olive oil to make the dish both warm and extra crispy.

You'll want to choose a bread that can stand up to the juicy topping without getting soggy; think a sturdy baguette or loaf of ciabatta. Allow the tomatoes to marinate for at least 15 minutes before using to maximize flavor, and don't forget to add a sprinkle of grated Parmesan before serving.

For tomatoes:
1 large heirloom tomato, diced
1/3 cup basil leaves, chopped
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
For bread:
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
4 1-inch slices ciabatta or baguette
1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Prepare topping: In a large bowl, combine tomatoes, basil, garlic, vinegar, olive oil and a pinch of salt and grind of pepper, and toss to coat. Set aside while you fry bread.

Add olive oil to a large frying pan set over medium-high heat. (I used cast-iron). When oil is hot, add bread slices and fry until golden and crispy, then flip with tongs and cook for another minute. Remove to a platter.

Divide tomato mixture among the bread slices. Garnish with a sprinkle of grated Parmesan and serve.

Serves 4.

– Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Honey Mustard Chicken, Tomato & Zucchini

It's easy to dry out boneless chicken breast on a grill because the meat is so lean. But if you borrow a cooking technique from campers, and wrap them with veggies in a foil packet, you'll get tender, juicy chicken and perfectly cooked vegetables every time.

Feel free to cook the chicken with any vegetable you like. I used a mix of yellow and green summer squash and added in half of a leftover bell pepper I found in my crisper.

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
1 medium shallot, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1/2 cup whole-grain mustard
1/4 cup honey
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon hot paprika
Large pinch of crushed red pepper flakes
1 medium green zucchini, thinly sliced
1 medium yellow zucchini, thinly sliced
1 cup halved cherry tomatoes
2 teaspoons kosher salt, divided
3/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, divided
1 1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts,
Chopped fresh parsley, for serving

Prepare a grill for medium-high heat; preheat 5 minutes. (I used a charcoal grill.)

In a small saucepan over medium heat, heat 2 tablespoons oil. Cook shallot and garlic, stirring occasionally, until light golden and fragrant, about 2 minutes.

Add whole-grain mustard, honey, Dijon mustard, paprika and red pepper and stir to combine. Bring to a boil, then continue to boil over medium heat, stirring frequently, until thickened and slightly darkened in color, about 2 minutes. Let cool slightly.

In a medium bowl, toss zucchini, tomatoes, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/4 teaspoon black pepper and remaining 2 tablespoons oil.

Season chicken with remaining 1 1/2 teaspoons salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper.

Arrange 4 sheets of foil on a flat surface. Pull up sides to form a shallow boat. Divide vegetable mixture among packets. Portion chicken into four servings, then nestle each next to vegetables.

Spread tops of chicken with honey mustard sauce. Tightly fold foil packets to seal.

Grill, covered and rotating packets halfway through, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of chicken registers 165 degrees, 18-20 minutes. Carefully open foil packets and sprinkle with parsley.

Serves 4.

– Adapted from delish.com

Peach Crisp

Peaches taste even sweeter when they're baked and their natural sugars concentrate and caramelize. Here, they shine in an easy-to-prepare crisp made with brown sugar and oats adapted from one of my favorite baking sites, sallysbakingaddiction.com.

You don't have to peel the peaches, but some don't like the texture of the fruit's skin so it may be a game-day decision based on who you're cooking for.

For filling:
5 cups sliced peaches, peeled or unpeeled
1/4 cup all-purpose flour, spooned and leveled
1/2 cup granulated sugar
Pinch of salt
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
For topping:
1/2 cup packed light or dark brown sugar
2/3 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup unsalted butter, very cold and cubed
2/3 cup old-fashioned whole rolled oats (or quick oats)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a deep-dish 9-inch pie dish, 9-inch square pan, 10-inch cast iron skillet, or any 2- or 2 1/2 -quart baking dish. Set aside.

Gently mix all of the filling ingredients together in a large bowl, then spread into the baking dish.

Make the topping: Whisk brown sugar, flour, cinnamon and salt together in a medium bowl. Cut in the butter using a pastry cutter or forks until the mixture is crumbly. Fold in oats. Sprinkle evenly over filling.

Bake for 45 – 50 minutes until the topping is golden brown and the fruit juices are bubbling around the edges. Remove from the oven, place on a wire rack, and allow to cool for a few minutes before serving warm. You can also serve room temperature or cold.

Cover leftovers and store in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Serves 4-6.

– Adapted from sallysbakingaddiction.com

Steamed mussels get bite from 'nduja, a soft and spicy sausage from Southern Italy

By GRETCHEN McKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

If you like eating and cooking foods from across the globe, you'll probably agree that sometimes the one ingredient that makes a certain dish sing is one you can't easily pronounce if you don't speak that country's language.

For me, that includes anything that gets a savory heat with 'nduja (pronounced en-DOO-ya), a soft and spicy sausage made with small but mighty sun-dried chilies from the Calabria region of Southern Italy.

The fatty ground pork that makes the spreadable salume such a tasty topping for pizza and pasta melts when it is heated up in a pan, blooming the Calabrian chile in the sausage's own fat. The result not only imbues the dish with a flaming red hue – that bleeds onto your fingers, if you're not careful – but adds a spicy, umami-rich flavor that is quite addictive.

Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

'Nduja, a spreadable pork sausage made with Calabrian red chilies, adds a spicy finish to mussels cooked in white wine.

In this recipe adapted from Serious Eats, the sausage gives a spicy kick to mussels steamed in dry white wine (I used sauvignon blanc, which also is good for pairing with the finished dish) along with sauteed shallot and garlic. A good squeeze of lemon along with its zest adds to its bright finish.

To serve, you definitely need a crusty, quality bread – such as sourdough or a baguette, hopefully toasted – to soak up the broth.

Mussels are best prepared and eaten the day you buy them. When cooking them, be sure to discard any that are cracked or don't close when tapped with another mussel. To remove grit, scrub shells well under cold running water. To remove beards (that look like wisps of hair trapped between the shells) grab and pull toward the hinge-end of the mussel.

You can find 'nduja at most Italian markets. While unopened logs can last several months in the fridge or pantry, once opened it should be refrigerated to prevent it from drying out and absorbing other flavors.

Steamed Mussels and 'Nduja

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
2 large shallots, thinly sliced
2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
Kosher salt
2 ounces 'nduja (about 1/4 cup)
1 cup dry white wine
1 pound mussels, scrubbed and debearded
1/4 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves
Juice and zest from 1 lemon
Toasted bread, for serving

In a large saucepan, heat oil over medium heat until shimmering.

Add shallots and garlic, season lightly with salt, and cook, stirring frequently, until softened but not brown, 5-7 minutes.

Add 'nduja and, using a wooden spoon, break it into pieces and stir vigorously to combine with shallots and garlic.

Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until fat from 'nduja separates and shallots and garlic are stained red and fully coated with 'nduja, 3-5 minutes longer.

Add wine, increase heat to high and bring to a boil.

Add mussels, stir, cover pan with a lid and cook, shaking pan constantly and peeking every 30 seconds to stir.

Cook just until all the mussels are open, 2-4 minutes. Remove from heat, and using tongs, quickly transfer to a warmed heat-proof serving bowl. Discard any mussels that did not open.

Cover mussels with saucepan lid to keep warm.

Add chopped parsley, lemon juice and zest to saucepan and stir to combine.

Taste broth and adjust seasoning with salt, if needed.

To serve: Remove lid from the serving bowl, and pour contents of saucepan over mussels.

Serve immediately, passing toasted bread at the table along with a large empty bowl for collecting empty mussel shells.

Serves 2.

– Adapted from seriouseats.com

Ralph Barbosa is *‘broke – comedy wise’* after his new special

Comedian Ralph Barbosa in “Ralph Barbosa: Planet Bosa.”

Christopher Willard / Hulu / Disney / TNS

By NATE JACKSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — From the outside, it appears that Ralph Barbosa has it all.

Aside from A-list comedian status hanging with superstars like Dave Chappelle, he’s known to show off his garage full of his favorite cars (even a few that actually run, he says), and he has a brand new comedy special on Hulu, “Planet Bosa,” that premiered earlier this month.

But following the release of his new hour, Barbosa claims he’s “broke.”

For comedians, specials aren’t just a celebration of your success, they’re also a funeral for your best material. Though he’s dubbed his latest trek across the country the Bean Without a Cause Tour, he’s also back to square one – a comic without new material, or at least not much of it. “I’ve got about 10 minutes [worth of jokes] to my name, I’m broke – comedy-wise, I’m broke,” he says with a sly grin. “It’s the funnest place to be.”

It’s a feeling most comics can relate to, though few in the last couple years have been on the ride Barbosa’s been on. Coming out of relative obscurity from the Dallas comedy scene, he garnered viral fame by being dissed and then apologized to by comedy legend George Lopez, who didn’t know who he was at the time despite Barbosa being at the forefront of the next wave of Latin comics, thanks in large part to a breakout set on Don’t Tell Comedy. Garnering nationwide buzz since his debut Netflix special “Cowabunga,” his latest hour on Hulu finds the 28-year-old reaching the top of his game.

Aside from getting more comfortable on stage, the spark of energy in this new phase of his career is a welcome surprise from a guy whose schedule barely leaves time for sleep. Yet somehow he’s still managed to squeeze in a second side career working on cars on his YouTube Channel Formula Bean. Recently, Barbosa spoke with The Times about finding his comfort zone in comedy and touring in honor of friend and fellow comedian Ken Flores, who was set to tour alongside Barbosa and comedian Rene Vaca before his tragic death earlier this year. He also discusses one of his more important challenges, writing cleverly authentic jokes about the shocking ICE raids that have led to widespread detention and deportation of immigrants. But it wasn’t just a laughing matter for Barbosa, who also helped people affected by the raids for a period of time by donating money to people who reached out to him directly through social media.

“I don’t like that people are getting separated from their families when they’re hardworking people,” the comedian said. “They’re people who go to a whole new country to learn the language and a whole new environment, in search of a better life, and it’s considered illegal.”

Q: Usually when we do these interviews about comedy specials, they happen before the special is released. Now that “Planet Bosa” has been out on Hulu for almost two weeks, what’s it been like seeing the reaction to it and did it match what you were hoping for?

A: A lot of my fans have been watching it. There’s been a few people that reached out to me saying that they found me through [watching it], which feels really good – it’s what you want from a special. I feel like Spider-Man on “Spider-Man 3” when everybody’s cheering his name and he’s like, “They love me!” It feels good.

Q: When I talked to you a couple years ago, it was right before your first special, “Cowabunga,” and I noticed with “Planet Bosa,” the energy just feels different. You’re more animated, you’re doing voices and stuff that I think people maybe weren’t used to seeing from you. How did you wanna change up your style or advance it this time around?

A: I think I just got more comfortable. When I did that first special with Netflix, I was really super nervous. I’d never shot a special before. Everything that’s been going on in my life, I feel like it came at me really fast. I feel I’m still very – especially compared to other comics – I’m very much like a rookie comic. Especially a rookie as in like a full-time comedian working in the industry. So like that first special, I was really nervous, I was very tense. I still had a lot of fun with it, don’t get me wrong, but I was really sticking to the script. By the time we taped this special, I’d been on the road so much, and my feet were a little more wet, so I was just more comfortable. So I think that one is me being myself more, this “Planet Bosa” is just like me being myself more.

Q: What’s cool about what’s going on now in comedy with I feel is a very strong wave of Latin comedians like you, Rene Vaca, you had that obviously with the late comedian Ken Flores. What’s it like to be able to have that group around you of comedians?

A: I’ve always been a little introverted, though, especially with other comics, like I get kind of nervous. Rene helped me get out of that. Rene and Ken were always super close and they were always inviting me to stuff and I would always be too nervous to go. I used to be really intimidated by them. But once I met them and hung out with them a couple times, I realized that we’re a lot alike. Like we were the exact same age, the three of us. The three of us were all born in ’96. I feel like we shared a lot of the same fears and anxieties, a lot the same stresses and family situations. I consider myself very lucky to be able to hang out with them. And I’m very lucky to still get to hang with Rene.That dude’s a fool, man – I love him.

Q: Obviously, it was rough going on that tour with Rene because of the loss of Ken who was going on the road with you as well. But given what you guys had to go through emotionally and sort of mentally to press on, was it like looking back on completing that tour and doing things the way that Ken would have wanted?

A: I felt like that was our way of letting Ken get his proper rest. We found out Ken passed away on the day we were supposed to sign the paperwork to finalize all the tour details, which was heartbreaking. He passes away right before we’re supposed to start this tour together, the three of us. And now as we’re dealing with that within those same few days, we had to make a decision. They were pressuring us to make the decision do we still wanna do the tour or not. And so you don’t even wanna talk about that stuff. But I think me and Rene both knew that Ken would have wanted us to do it. Ken would’ve probably been really ashamed of us if we got all sad and just didn’t do it. Also I think it helped out his family a lot because we still gave his cut to his family. So I think we needed to do that for Ken. And I mean, it was still a fun tour. It was bittersweet, because every time we’d have a really fun night and we’re all laughing, we’d all have a moment where we knew it would be that much better if Ken was also here. But I know he was there in spirit, you know what I mean? I think Ken is anywhere Rene is. I think those two are inseparable. So anytime we’re with Rene, I still feel like Ken’s there too.

Q: Why do you feel like the perspective you’re bringing along with Rene as the next generation of Latin comedians is important to be heard at a time in this country with so much going on politically with immigration?

A: I don’t necessarily think it’s important to get my voice out there but I do like making jokes about [ICE and immigration] because that’s like the only way I know how to bring attention to it. I’m not a big political dude or anything like that, but yeah, I’ve made jokes about things like immigration stuff, ICE stuff. But I guess that is my way of getting attention on that issue. I would like people to get attention on it. I feel like there’s certain topics, certain subjects that you can’t avoid after a certain point. We should talk about it, or we should at least put it in the faces of the people who aren’t gonna talk about it. Like if you’re not gonna talk about it that’s fine too, but you at least gotta hear about it.

Q: One thing you mentioned that you were doing for a period of time was to help people affected by have family members detained during ICE raids by donating money to people who contacted you on Instagram asking for help to pay their bills. What inspired you to do that?

A: What I ended up doing is just sending hot dogs from Five Guys to all the families in need. I sent out over 180 hot dogs – I’m kidding. No, I sent out money. I hope it helped people out. I hope I wasn’t just getting scammed the whole time. I’m sure I got scammed by a good number of people. But I let people know that if they were affected by the ICE raids in any way and were behind on rent or groceries or if maybe the main provider in someone’s house was taken away or just going through something like that just to let me know and I’ll send what I can. I didn’t think I’d get as many messages as I got – I got a lot. I got to as many as I could and I sent out a lot of money before it started getting a little dangerously low on my end. Like, what’s the point of having money and having fans if like other people can’t enjoy it too? So I’m sorry for those of you that I wasn’t able to get to, and I hope the ones that I did get to were helped, even if it was just a bit. I don’t like that people are getting separated from their families when they’re hardworking people, they’re people who go to a whole new country to learn the language and a whole new environment, in search of a better life, and it’s considered illegal. Like I said, I don’t know about laws and government. I’m sure someone’s watching this thinking I’m just an ignorant idiot, but I don’t know, man. It just seems f----- up to me.

Q: It’s also about being able to deal with the situation by laughing about it. And that even includes making jokes about not being considered “Mexican enough” by immigrants and getting fed up enough to say “Go home! Well, not to your home.”

A: I think I fall under that category, there’s a saying in Spanish – ni de aquí, ni de allá.” It means “not from here or from there,” it’s like the middle ground... I feel like it’s given me perspective – I hope it has at least, I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t know when I’m being ignorant or not. That’s why I tell people don’t take me too serious, because I don’t really take myself too seriously.

Q: I don’t know how you really can as a comedian. You gotta be able to laugh at yourself, right?

A: That’s what I’m saying. But people still get angry in my comments just cause I make stupid jokes – I don’t understand it.

Q: Is there any key piece of advice you’ve gotten from a comedian that you’ve looked up to that has helped you in your career?

A: Yes and no. Because every comedian’s so different... So not everybody’s advice works. It could sometimes work for you. My favorite advice has probably been from [Dave] Chappelle, “You just gotta keep getting on stage. Just keep getting out on stage. Keep working on material.” You gotta get the reps. There’s no shortcuts to it.

Q: Even though you’ve been doing it now so much, has there been a time on stage, more recently, where you’re nervous?

A: I’m always nervous, and I’m always messing up jokes. I don’t think the audience can always tell, but in my mind, I’m messing them up.

Q: You’re very even keel on the surface, so the fact that you say that is also kind of surprising.

A: Nah, I’m up there freaking out, man. Well, in a good way, you know? It’s fun. I’m always nervous. But it’s part of what makes it fun.

Q: And when you’re not on the road, I know you’re working a lot with cars. Can you talk about your YouTube channel Formula Bean that’s all about fixing up old cars?

A: Over a year ago, I started hanging out with an automotive content creator. His name’s Luis Cisneros, the dude’s crazy smart. He’s showing me how to work on my own cars and he would make car content about it. And I asked him if I could make content with him too. I feel like everybody’s a content creator nowadays. I feel content is key, whether it’s, whatever type it is. I have a lot of fun working on cars and recording us doing stupid things with cars. So we made a YouTube channel called the Formula Bean. And we named it that because Formula One is like the pinnacle of automotive racing, like top of the line cars, top of line drivers, top of the line engineers. But ours is more Formula Bean because it’s just a couple of Mexicans in a garage on some Facebook Marketplace projects. The stuff we do, I think it’s stuff that most people can watch and be like, “Oh, I can learn how to do that easy.” So I’m hoping that’s what is getting across.

Q: Do you feel like cars and comedy have some sort of correlation, like in terms of just working on them, or do you keep it like totally separate?

A: Nah, I keep it totally separate. I need something different than comedy so that I could continue to enjoy comedy. I get tired of stuff fast, man. If I’m really into one thing – I can hyper-focus on it. I’ll zone in on this one subject for a while, but I can’t keep it long-term. I need to do cars and zone in on cars for like a good month and a half, and then I need to go back into just straight up comedy mindset.

Q: Never a combo? I was thinking like a Jerry Seinfeld like “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee” type of thing?

A: I mean maybe if a comedian wants to come hang out, but I’m not gonna talk a whole lot of shop …

Q: No “Comedians in Cars Getting Frustrated”?

A: Nah. I need cars to completely distract me from comedy so that I can come back to comedy with fresh eyes.

Q: You mentioned that you only get about an hour and a half of sleep a night. When do you rest?

A: Whenever I just crash out, like randomly – and people get mad. Cuz they don’t know I guess but like I’ll be falling asleep at random events. I’ve never been the type of person like I can just put on my pajamas and lay down in the bed. I feel unproductive. I feel I need to go until I’m done thinking or until my brain just goes kaput. So even though we’re working on stuff, I feel like my mind is always thinking about other stuff when it can. I don’t really knock out until my body’s just like, “alright f--- this, bro, I’m done.”

Q: You’re on your second special on a major platform, you are selling out all over the country. Is there more that you feel like you still want to do?

A: I need a new hour, that’s all I know right now. I need a new hour of jokes. I got like 10 minutes to my name. Comedy-wise, I am broke. This is the funnest place to be, square one.

MOVIE REVIEW

Giles Keyte / Netflix / TNS

Ben Kingsley, left, Helen Mirren and Pierce Brosnan in "The Thursday Murder Club."

'The Thursday Murder Club' is Netflix's disappointing murder mystery

By GEMMA WILSON
The Seattle Times (TNS)

A good cozy mystery is a gift to us all, but in the case of "The Thursday Murder Club," a Netflix film adaptation of Richard Osman's wildly successful novel of the same name, the gift is wrapped up in a bow so tight it's strangling the film's blood supply.

Retirees Elizabeth (Helen Mirren), Ron (Pierce Brosnan) and Ibrahim (Ben Kingsley) live in Coopers Chase Retirement Village, a former convent repurposed into what looks like the most enviable senior community on the planet. Spacious apartments! Art classes! Llamas!

Once a week, on Thursdays, this team assembles to solve cold case murders for fun because, you see, older people do more than just crochet. When recent arrival Joyce (Celia Imrie) stumbles on their meeting while showing her robotic hedge fund-manager daughter around the place, Elizabeth senses a useful new member (Joyce was a trauma nurse) and invites her to join.

As they look into an unsolved murder from the 1970s, bad news descends: One of the building's evil co-owners (David Tennant) wants to kick all the residents out and turn their beloved Coopers Chase into luxury flats. Even more bad news: a brand-new murder!

Now The Club members must deploy all the skills acquired throughout their rich, full lifetimes to thwart these evildoers. Ron was a trade unionist, Ibrahim a psychiatrist and Elizabeth has an unexpected past that makes her very good at crime-solving. Joyce, in addition to her nursing expertise, makes excellent cakes.

They join forces with Donna, a local cop (played by Naomi Ackie, who I am delighted to see everywhere these days) who recently relocated from the Big Bad City and is trying to make headway in her small-town police station.

Everyone in this movie is excellent: The leads, absolutely, but also Daniel Mays as Donna's bumbling detective colleague, Tom Ellis as Ron's boxer son, Jonathan Pryce as Elizabeth's husband and Richard E. Grant as someone whose identity I won't give away. Truly, it's aces all the way down.

'The Thursday Murder Club'

★★

MPA rating: PG-13 (for violent content/bloody images, strong language and some sexual references)

Running time: 1:58

How to watch: On Netflix

And it needs to be because the screenplay, by Katy Brand and Suzanne Heathcote, is pretty weak tea.

The characters, in particular, are so broadly drawn that this feels at times like a children's movie. Or perhaps that's because it's directed by Chris Columbus, famous purveyor of kids' fare ("Home Alone," the first two "Harry Potter" movies, "The Christmas Chronicles: Part Two") with some schmaltzy all-ages work thrown in ("Nine Months," "Stepmom," "Bicentennial Man" – a movie I once watched with friends because, as the friend who dared us to put it, it's so bad it's "an endurance test").

So I don't know why I was surprised when twinkly music underlined any emotional pivot, bald exposition came fast and furious, actors gazed long and meaningfully at clues or a secret recording was magically rewound and cued up to exactly the right place, on the spot.

Despite all the murders, there's very little evil present in this story, and what evil does exist is of the silly, mustache-twirling variety. (Tennant, in particular, is so very, very good when he's being awful.)

In the end, once The Club has unraveled all of this mystery's many (conveniently and coincidentally) interwoven threads, the conclusion seems to be edging toward nuance – then immediately changes course, plopping us back into a happily-ever-after predicated on black-and-white thinking about right and wrong.

As a way of inspiring the next generation of cozy-mystery lovers, "The Thursday Murder Club" may be a rousing success.

But as a fervent consumer of mysteries and someone over the age of 10, my response was frustration that stems largely from disappointment. The satisfaction of a cozy mystery doesn't always come exclusively from a complex puzzle solved; it also comes from justice done and, ideally, comeuppance savored. Despite being beautifully made, this tepid, moralizing story denies us any of those pleasures. Rude.

MOVIE REVIEW

'The Roses' has winning leads but loses the war

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Like drops of water hitting a hot pan, Jay Roach's "The Roses" makes a dramatic sizzle, then evaporates on contact. Adapted from Warren Adler's 1981 novel, and a remake of Danny DeVito's 1989 film "The War of the Roses," starring Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner, Roach's film is an update on this black comedy about the ultimate marriage strife. He's installed a pair of Brits, Benedict Cumberbatch and Olivia Colman, as the quarrelsome couple, and there are no two finer actors to take on the tangle of insults penned by Tony McNamara, who wrote the screenplay.

Colman has already tackled McNamara's gloriously florid language in her Oscar-winning role as Queen Anne in "The Favourite" (McNamara was also nominated for his screenplay for that film, as well as for his screenplay for "Poor Things" five years later), and Cumberbatch is her perfect sparring partner for this duel of bone-dry witty banter. In the mouths of Colman and Cumberbatch, every sling and arrow is a delectable bite laced with acid.

Jaap Buitendijk / Searchlight Pictures / TNS

Benedict Cumberbatch, left, and Olivia Colman in "The Roses." (\

Perhaps that's the problem with Roach's take on "The Roses": do they hate each other or are they just British? It's a question that bedevils the American characters in the film too, who try to discern if their banter is just that, or something more.

Ivy (Colman) and Theo (Cumberbatch) meet – and mate – cute in a restaurant kitchen where Ivy is an up-and-coming chef, Theo an exasperated architect escaping a work lunch. After two shakes of a walk-in refrigerator, they find themselves living in Mendocino, California, with their twins Hattie (Delaney Quinn) and Roy (Ollie Robinson). Theo's spectacular new museum is about to open, and to encourage Ivy to pursue her culinary talents (and stop baking their children elaborate cakes), he buys her a restaurant, a seafood bistro she promptly names "We've Got Crabs."

The Roses are the ultimate odd couple: she's whimsical, irresponsible and doesn't take anything seriously; he's rigid, intense and feels every ounce of the weight of the world on his shoulders. From the jump you can tell they're a mismatch, but they get each other's brittle humor, every wisecrack followed with a laugh.

They're especially out of place with their American friends, who are drawn as caricatures from an outsider's point of view. Yes, we have a problem with guns in this country, but the average Northern California libs aren't letting off steam at the shooting range with their pals (it's a plot contrivance to get a pistol into their home for later). Why Theo and Ivy pal around with this kooky, pretentious group (Andy Samberg, Kate McKinnon, Zoë Chao, Jamie Demetriou) whom they clearly can't stand is more of a mystery than why their marriage falls apart.

'The Roses'

★★ ½

MPA rating: R (for language throughout, sexual content, and drug content)

Running time: 1:45

How to watch: In theaters

It starts with a storm that destroys Theo's museum, and sends a San Francisco food critic into Ivy's clutches. A rave review sets her on the path to foodie superstardom, while a viral video of Theo reacting to the demise of his spectacular building destroys his career in seconds. Even those plot points feel a bit dated, with Ivy's ascent as a food star marked by hobnobbing with David Chang, and Theo agonizing over remixes and GIFs of his anguish. It all feels behind trend, even if this is a remake of an '80s film.

The wit and wordplay never cease, and there's much pleasure to be drawn from Colman and Cumberbatch spitting McNamara's contemptuous dialogue with aplomb. But there's an arch distance from the banter. The crux of the conflict is Theo feeling emasculated as he becomes the caregiver and Ivy the breadwinner. He molds their feral twins into high-performance athletes (Hala Finley and Wells Rappaport) and Ivy feels her children have been stolen from her. There are deep emotional wounds presented but never fully explored as they default to verbal cruelty disguised as "repartee," but rarely is there any sincerity to sit with.

Their climatic conflict is over the stunning home, designed by Theo, funded by Ivy, in an attempt to save his ego and their union. The actual war is abbreviated, so what we get is the long lead-up to their breakup, and one very memorable scene of Allison Janney as a ferocious divorce lawyer, who goes head to head with Samberg.

In the original film, the story of the Roses and their divorce is presented as a cautionary tale, something to heed. McNamara and Roach have done away with that framing device, replacing DeVito's divorce attorney with a rancorous couples therapy session. Theo and Ivy love and loathe each other in equal measure, and this is a heightened, cartoonish version of marital resentment, but what's the takeaway here? If it's nothing at all, that meaninglessness is impressed upon the audience. If they don't care, why should we?

Aaron Epstein / Peacock / TNS

Domhnall Gleeson in a scene from the upcoming "The Office" spinoff "The Paper."

Domhnall Gleeson isn't Superman

But in 'The Office' spinoff 'The Paper,' he can be Clark Kent

By YVONNE VILLARREAL
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Could Domhnall Gleeson be the savior of local journalism?

OK, maybe that's a sensational oversell – but his latest character knows that news stories need a hook to draw readers in fast. We're trying.

The 42-year-old Irish actor has built an impressive and diverse career, often playing people entangled in precarious situations: a young man with the ability to time travel who tries to change his past in hopes of improving his future in the heartfelt and whimsical "About Time"; the leader of a group of fur trappers working in unsettled territory in the Midwest who gets caught up in a gruesome fight for survival in "The Revenant"; or a software programmer selected to be part of an experiment with a female robot with humanlike qualities in "Ex Machina."

Now, he's stepping into the turbulent, you-have-to-laugh-to-keep-from-crying experience of being in the newspaper biz.

In Peacock's "The Paper," Gleeson plays Ned Sampson, a nerdy, well-meaning and enviably hopeful guy who has just been installed as editor in chief of the Toledo Truth Teller. His qualifications? Well, he used to sell cardboard and toilet paper, and he's a nepo baby with a journalism degree. And he's coming in with earnest intentions: to motivate a small staff that has grown restless and dissatisfied with its their profession – succumbing to the unsavory demands of the job in 2025, like selecting a wire story about Elizabeth Olsen's nighttime skin routine only to discover it exceeds the allotted print space – and revive, or in some cases kick off, their desire to do responsible local journalism that delivers useful and effectual information to the community.

"When I was a kid, I didn't want to be Superman; I wanted to be Clark Kent," Ned says in the first episode. "Because to me, Clark is the real superhero. He's saving the world, too, by working at a newspaper. And that, to me, is much more noble and much more achievable, and I love that."

It's a romantic – some might say naive – ideal that hasn't been squeezed dry by cynicism. And as someone in an industry as handcuffed to budgets and the bottom line as any, Gleeson can relate to that wide-eyed objective to do meaningful work even when it's been overpowered by economic forces.

"The first time you do something, the wonder of it is huge," Gleeson says on a recent day. "You only see the good stuff – or I did, at least. Then as you get older, you do get a little more tired. It's a little harder to get up in the morning. The industry that I'm in, I'm constantly amazed at the people, older than me, who've retained their youthful enthusiasm for it. I find that very aspirational. I think, despite some of the cliches that there are around acting – and around journalism – that you'll find a lot of people who really, really believe in it into their 50s, 60s, 70s."

Stuart C. Wilson / Getty Images / TNS

Domhnall Gleeson attends the "Echo Valley" European premiere at the BFI Southbank on June in London.

But "The Paper" is a spinoff of "The Office" – in the loosest sense – so this isn't a soapbox. Still, it tugs on a topical issue within its comedy. (We'll get to that.) First, though, it's important to understand the connective tissue to its predecessor: the same mockumentary crew that filmed the mundane, silly and often completely relatable 9-to-5 lives of the staff at Scranton's Dunder Mifflin has now set its sights on a newsroom of uninspired misfits trying to keep the ship above water as it navigates the wrecking waves of modern journalism. And to help bridge "The Office" to this workplace, former Dunder Mifflin accountant Oscar Martinez (played by Oscar Núñez) now works as an accountant at the paper.

As a fan of "The Office," Gleeson says playing in the mockumentary format brought a unique layer to how he thought about his character: "How does he [Ned] feel about them being in this place where he's trying to do well as a new boss? You start to think ... he'll want the good stuff on the record. If he does something that he feels is good, he'll probably want to make sure they got it. And if something's not going as planned, he will try to hide away. When we were shooting, it was interesting because I'd find myself between our two camera operators and almost looking to them from time to time in a similar way – like, 'What did they think?'"

Gleeson is beaming in from Scotland, where he's been for the last month filming an as-yet-unannounced independent film. He quickly apologizes for his hair – in all of its shaggy, slightly curled glory – as he combs his fingers through it: "I've got a perm. Life is good."

He says he wasn't necessarily looking to do a TV series right now, but when "The Paper" came along, he was eager to dive into its comedic trenches.

But he first made sure to check in with at least two of the original cast members from "The Office": Steve Carell and John Krasinski. Carell, who played the show's bumbling boss Michael Scott for seven seasons, starred opposite Gleeson in FX's 2022 psychological thriller "The Patient," about a troubled man with homicidal urges (Gleeson) who holds his therapist (Carell) captive. And Krasinski, whose role as the show's dry-witted paper salesman Jim Halpert propelled him to stardom, starred alongside Gleeson in this year's heist action-adventure film, "Fountain of Youth," directed by Guy Ritchie.

"What's great about both those guys," he says, "is it wasn't like, 'You should do this, you should do that.' They each said, 'I think it would be great. I think you would have loads of fun. I think you could do something really good.' And that was it. I jumped."

He adds: "And don't forget, when they did the show, they were under a lot of scrutiny because the U.K. 'Office' was such a masterpiece and had been so heralded, and they still found their space. It took a little time, but they found it. I'm just hoping for the same for us – that we find our space."

Still, he's aware fans of the U.S. "Office," which ran for nine seasons and is one of the most streamed series today, might be reluctant to give "The Paper" a try. And that those who do, might be quick to make comparisons or feel the impulse to see whether these new characters fit the archetypes of the original – for example, is Ned more like a Michael or more like a Jim?

"I feel like what we have is different enough to be its own thing," he says. "My belief is Ned's different to both of those characters. He is a new boss in a job he is unqualified for to a certain degree, and he carries a different eternal ambition and optimism about it that sets him apart. There will always be overlaps, but it's different enough that people will, hopefully, take him on his own merits."

Created by Greg Daniels, who adapted the American version of "The Office," and Michael Koman ("How to With John Wilson," "Nathan for You"), the series arrives at a particularly fraught and existential moment in journalism. Each passing week brings a sobering headline about how news organizations are either adapting or shuttering because of rapid economical, technological and cultural shifts, as well as responding to political pressure.

"First and foremost, the show needs to work in terms of comedy," Gleeson says. "I also think that the press has always been under threat to some degree. There are always people in power who don't want the thing printed that doesn't make them look good or they don't like. But right now feels full-on extreme."

However, he believes Daniels and Koman care deeply about journalism and journalists. So how do you make something funny without being too satirical or negative?

"They show both sides of it – the idealism and the difficulty to live up to those ideals," Gleeson says. "If it was a show where everybody did good journalism, I don't know how funny people are going to find it. I think what's funny about this is people trying to do good journalism and not really living up to it all the time."

Daniels and Koman, who spoke together on a separate video call, say that if "The Office" was a story of people who were very uninspired in their work, "The Paper" is a story of how people can be inspired in their work. And the key was finding someone to be the leader of a bleak endeavor who was a decent person and could boost morale.

"To me, he's in that category of people like Jimmy Stewart – he can be so funny, but he's brimming with humanity and emotion," Koman says, pointing to Gleeson's performance in "Black Mirror" as a man brought back to life as an android using his social media posts. "I just thought, 'Oh my gosh' – that he could play the same person basically, but still there are subtle differences between these two people. I have no idea how he does it. But I thought, if he could do that, he can do anything."

Plus, Gleeson had comedic chops, and you want somebody who is simultaneously funny and emotionally available, Koman says. Daniels adds that he'd be happy to have someone like the actor as a boss.

"I was in a job, at one point, that everybody thought was cool, but it was very dysfunctionally run. I remember telling people that I thought it would have been more fun to work at, say, Enterprise car rental if the boss was fun and the spirit was good," Daniels says. "We needed someone who seems like a fun guy and a very sincere person and has a sense of mission. And the thing is, it's a very hard mission – it's almost impossibly hard to imagine he's [Ned] going to turn the clock backwards and restore this grand institution. But he's trying, and it's a valuable thing to do. When he says, 'I want to be Clark Kent' – that was one of his [Gleeson's] things; he added that notion when he was thinking about the character."

Because Gleeson is nothing if not intentional about comedy.

The son of actor Brendan Gleeson, Domhnall describes himself as a shy kid growing up; but seeing people not be shy who could really make him laugh "loudly in a way that was embarrassing," he says, was a feeling he craved. He names funnymen like Peter Sellers and Jim Carrey and British sketch shows like "Smack the Pony" and all-things "Monty Python" as favorites. His first job as an actor was in Martin McDonagh's unruly black comedy "The Lieutenant of Inishmore," with a plot that hinges on a mangled cat. In his 20s, he wrote and starred in the Irish sketch comedy show "Your Bad Self" – one memorable skit involved a group of friends en route to a concert and one guy (Gleeson) in the backseat has drunk too much lemonade. Short on time and believing he only has to pee, a friend hands him a soda bottle mid-drive, only to watch him drop his trousers and squat over the bottle.

"Now, Jim Carrey is a unicorn – I'm aware of my limitations," he says, quick to let it be known that he is not an improv genius. "That's not what I'm going for. I remember seeing 'The Royal Tenenbaums' and that making me laugh and sort of cry. You've got a bunch of amazing actors who do comedy and drama all the time, but then you've got Gene Hackman and Anjelica Huston doing something totally different and just full of pathos. That's a different sort of class of acting that's also comedic. All those things made me fall in love with it."

He's brought that blend of pathos, uniqueness and nerve to the comedy turns he's taken on over the years – including in the 2013 film "About Time," HBO's romance-thriller-comedy "Run" and Prime Video's "Frank of Ireland," which he created and starred in with his brother Brian. He approaches "The Paper" with the same level of intrigue for truth. He didn't do any intensive shadowing of journalists ahead of filming the show, but he did do some shoe-leather reporting – he spoke to and observed young reporters in Cincinnati and Toledo, and he visited a college newspaper in Ohio.

"What I took away from my experience was the fact that young people are still getting into it," he says. "I found that immensely heartening, even though they know that, not that the odds are stacked against journalism, but that it is a harder business to get into. It's a harder business to last in. It's a harder business to make a living in than it used to be and there are fewer positions available. Despite all that, people are still going into it because they care about it – and that vibrancy, despite the odds, I found really cool."

We're sure Clark Kent would agree.

BOOKS

Getty images

AI is making reading books feel obsolete

... and students have a lot to lose

THE CONVERSATION

By NAOMI S. BARON
American University
(The Conversation)

A perfect storm is brewing for reading.

AI arrived as both kids and adults were already spending less time reading books than they did in the not-so-distant past.

As a linguist, I study how technology influences the ways people read, write and think.

This includes the impact of artificial intelligence, which is dramatically changing how people engage with books or other kinds of writing, whether it's assigned, used for research or read for pleasure. I worry that AI is accelerating an ongoing shift in the value people place on reading as a human endeavor.

Everything but the book

AI's writing skills have gotten plenty of attention. But researchers and teachers are only now starting to talk about AI's ability to "read" massive datasets before churning out summaries, analyses or comparisons of books, essays and articles.

Need to read a novel for class? These days, you might get by with skimming through an AI-generated summary of the plot and key themes. This kind of possibility, which undermines people's motivation to read on their own, prompted me to write a book about the pros and cons of letting AI do the reading for you.

Palming off the work of summarizing or analyzing texts is hardly new. CliffsNotes dates back to the late 1950s. Centuries earlier, the Royal Society of London began producing summaries of the scientific papers that appeared in its voluminous "Philosophical Transactions." By the mid-20th century, abstracts had become ubiquitous in scholarly articles. Potential readers could now peruse the abstract before deciding whether to tackle the piece in its entirety.

The internet opened up an array of additional reading shortcuts. For instance, Blinkist is an app-based, subscription service that condenses mostly nonfiction books into roughly 15-minute summaries – called "Blinks" – that are available in both audio and text.

But generative AI elevates such workarounds to new heights. AI-driven apps like BooksAI provide the kinds of summaries and analyses that used to be crafted by humans. Meanwhile, BookAI.chat invites you to "chat" with books. In neither case do you need to read the books yourself.

If you're a student asked to compare Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" with J. D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" as coming-of-age novels, CliffsNotes only gets you so far. Sure, you can read summaries of each book, but you still must do the comparison yourself. With general large language models or specialized tools such as Google NotebookLM, AI handles both the "reading" and the comparing, even generating smart questions to pose in class.

The downside is that you lose out on a critical benefit of reading a coming-of-age novel: the personal growth that comes from vicariously experiencing the protagonist's struggles.

In the world of academic research, AI offerings like SciSpace, Elicit and Consensus combine the power of search engines and large language models. They locate relevant articles and then summarize and synthesize them, slashing the hours needed to conduct literature reviews. On its website, Elsevier's ScienceDirect AI gloats: "Goodbye wasted reading time. Hello relevance."

Maybe. Excluded from the process is judging for yourself what counts as relevant and making your own connections between ideas.

Reader unfriendly?

Even before generative AI went mainstream, fewer people were reading books, whether for pleasure or for class.

In the U.S., the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that the number of fourth graders who read for fun almost every day slipped from 53 percent in 1984 to 39 percent in 2022. For eighth graders? From 35 percent in 1984 to 14 percent in 2023. The U.K.'s 2024 National Literacy Trust survey revealed that only one in three 8- to 18-year-olds said they enjoyed reading in their spare time, a drop of almost 9 percentage points from just the previous year.

Similar trends exist among older students. In a 2018 survey of 600,000 15-year-olds across 79 countries, 49 percent reported reading only when they had to. That's up from 36% about a decade earlier.

The picture for college students is no brighter. A spateof recent articles has chronicled how little reading is happening in American higher education. My work with literacy researcher Anne Mangen found that faculty are reducing the amount of reading they assign, often in response to students refusing to do it.

Emblematic of the problem is a troubling observation from cultural commentator David Brooks:

"I once asked a group of students on their final day at their prestigious university what book had changed their life over the previous four years. A long, awkward silence followed. Finally a student said: 'You have to understand, we don't read like that. We only sample enough of each book to get through the class.'"

Now adults: According to YouGov, just 54 percent of Americans read at least one book in 2023. The situation in South Korea is even bleaker, where only 43 percent of adults said they had read at least one book in 2023, down from almost 87 percent in 1994. In the U.K., The Reading Agency observed declines in adult reading and hinted at one reason why. In 2024, 35 percent of adults identified as lapsed readers – they once read regularly, but no longer do. Of those lapsed readers, 26 percent indicated they had stopped reading because of time spent on social media.

The phrase "lapsed reader" might now apply to anyone who deprioritizes reading, whether it's due to lack of interest, devoting more time to social media or letting AI do the reading for you.

All that's lost, missed and forgotten

Why read in the first place?

The justifications are endless, as are the streams of books and websites making the case. There's reading for pleasure, stress reduction, learning and personal development.

You can find correlations between reading and brain growth in children, happiness, longevity and slowing cognitive decline.

This last issue is particularly relevant as people increasingly let AI do cognitive work on their behalf, a process known as cognitive offloading. Research has emerged-showing the extent to which people are engaging in cognitive offloading when they use AI. The evidence reveals that the more users rely on AI to perform work for them, the less they see themselves as drawing upon their own thinking capacities. A study employing EEG measurements found different brain connectivity patterns when participants enlisted AI to help them write an essay than when writing it on their own.

It's too soon to know what effects AI might have on our long-term ability to think for ourselves. What's more, the research so far has largely focused on writing tasks or general use of AI tools, not on reading. But if we lose practice in reading and analyzing and formulating our own interpretations, those skills are at risk of weakening.

Cognitive skills aren't the only thing at stake when we rely too heavily on AI to do our reading work for us. We also miss out on so much of what makes reading enjoyable – encountering a moving piece of dialogue, relishing a turn of phrase, connecting with a character.

AI's lure of efficiency is tantalizing. But it risks undermining the benefits of literacy.

Naomi S. Baron is Professor Emerita of Linguistics at American University.

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BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Aug. 16, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. For Richer For Poorer. Danielle Steel. Delacorte
2. We Are All Guilty Here. Karin Slaughter. Morrow
3. Atmosphere. Taylor Jenkins Reid. Ballantine
4. My Friends. Fredrik Backman. Atria
5. Onyx Storm. Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
6. Scarred (collector's ed.). Emily McIntire. Bloom
7. Not Quite Dead Yet. Holly Jackson. Bantam
8. The Pumpkin Spice Café (deluxe ed.). Laurie Gilmore. One More Chapter
9. The Fallen and the Kiss of Dusk. Carissa Broadbent. Bramble
10. Never Flinch. Stephen King. Scribner

Hardcover nonfiction

1. The Let Them Theory. Mel Robbins. Hay House
2. Mistakes That Made Me a Millionaire. Kim Perell. BenBella/Holt.
3. Tame Your Thoughts. Max Lucado. Thomas Nelson
4. Cudi. Scott "Kid Cudi" Mescudi. Simon & Schuster
5. Don't Believe Everything You Think (expanded ed.). Joseph Nguyen. Authors Equity
6. Semi-Well-Adjusted Despite Literally Everything. Alyson Stoner. St. Martin's
7. On Power. Mark R. Levin. Threshold
8. The Fort Bragg Cartel. Seth Harp. Viking
9. The Idaho Four. Patterson/Ward. Little, Brown
10. The Happiness Files. Arthur C. Brooks. Harvard Business Review

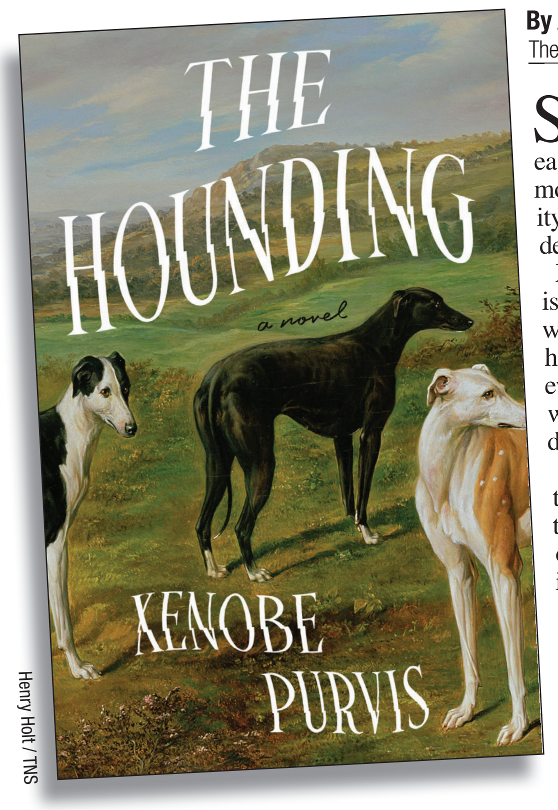
Trade paperback

1. Accomplice to the Villain. Hannah Nicole Maehrer. Red Tower
2. Do Not Disturb. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
3. Counting Miracles. Nicholas Sparks. Dell
4. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
5. The Tenant. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
6. Caught Up. Navessa Allen. Slowburn
7. Handsome Devil. L.J. Shen. Bloom
8. One Golden Summer. Carley Fortune. Berkley
9. Fourth Wing. Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
10. The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store. James McBride. Riverhead

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

Are mysterious sisters literally becoming dogs in 'The Hounding'?



Henry Holt /TNS

By ALEX REEVE
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Sometimes, being a dog – free to roam and sniff and run as you please – is easier than being a girl, always being monitored, with expectations of domesticity and meekness heavy on your shoulders.

Xenobe Purvis' eerie "The Hounding" is the story of the five Mansfield sisters, whom the villagers of Little Nettlebed have pegged as literal dogs; there are even a couple of not-so-trustworthy eye witnesses to the "fact" of their human-to-dog transformation.

As opposed to hearing the girls tell their own story, we see it unfold through the eyes of five villagers: four men and one woman. I thought it was really interesting that we never get the girls' perspectives – if not a little obvious as to the messaging of the book, which is that their perspectives are consistently ignored.

From the ferryman of the drying-up river to the owner and barmaid of the local pub to the new hay hand on the Mansfields' farm, each has their own opinion of the girls. Pete Darling, described as the greatest hater of all, especially hates the girls. He believes that they know nothing of frustration and suffering, that he is the only one who experiences it.

The barmaid, Temperance, seems to want to protect the girls, reflecting on what girls and women go through each day: "The great, gruelling trial of being a woman in a world governed by men. How painful it was, and how humiliating." The hay hand, Thomas, is in love with Anne Mansfield, the eldest of the girls. We get to see him falling for Anne and trying to protect her from the increasingly violent villagers.

Sometimes, Purvis is a little too on the nose in describing how odd the girls and Little Nettlebed are. Instead of showing us their oddities, one of Purvis' characters tells us there is an unnaturalness to Little Nettlebed that hung in the air, lingered behind windows, that the girls haunted the borders of the village.

The actions of the girls don't seem especially peculiar. Sure, they go almost everywhere together as a quintet, sometimes do not respond to villagers when addressed and do not participate in village goings-on as much as members of the community would like them to. But I would have liked to be shown the girls acting unusually. We are constantly told how bizarre they are, but it seems they are normal girls who struggle under the watchful eye of a judgmental community.

"The Hounding" places hearsay above humanity in its depiction of the Mansfield sisters, whose perspectives are never directly shown in the book. (Henry Holt)

The time period is never clarified in "The Hounding," but we can assume it is around 1600, due to comments made about a new object where you are able to see the stars up close. One character says girls have been called witches, and have been killed for it, in her lifetime. As a reader, it was fun being in "no man's land" for a while, before the hints about the place and time started to creep in. It almost seemed like a village separate from space and time, its own bubble of strangeness and eccentricities.

If you're looking for a novel that addresses the unfairness of being a girl and how being a wild animal is almost preferable, with interesting perspectives from the villagers, a little spooky atmosphere and an ambiguous ending, this is the book for you.

TECHNOLOGY

At one elite college, over 80% of students now use AI

– but it's not all about outsourcing their work

Visual Generation / Getty Images

By GERMÁN REYES
Middlebury College
(The Conversation)

Over 80 percent of Middlebury College students use generative AI for coursework, according to a recent survey I conducted with my colleague and fellow economist Zara Contractor. This is one of the fastest technology adoption rates on record, far outpacing the 40 percent adoption rate among U.S. adults, and it happened in less than two years after ChatGPT's public launch.

Although we surveyed only one college, our results align with similar studies, providing an emerging picture of the technology's use in higher education.

Between December 2024 and February 2025, we surveyed over 20 percent of Middlebury College's student body, or 634 students, to better understand how students are using artificial intelligence, and published our results in a working paper that has not yet gone through peer review.

What we found challenges the panic-driven narrative around AI in higher education and instead suggests that institutional policy should focus on how AI is used, not whether it should be banned.

Contrary to alarming headlines suggesting that "ChatGPT has unraveled the entire academic project" and "AI Cheating Is Getting Worse," we discovered that students primarily use AI to enhance their learning rather than to avoid work.

When we asked students about 10 different academic uses of AI – from explaining concepts and summarizing readings to proofreading, creating programming code and, yes, even writing essays – explaining concepts topped the list. Students frequently described AI as an "on-demand tutor," a resource that was particularly valuable when office hours weren't available or when they needed immediate help late at night.

We grouped AI uses into two types: "augmentation" to describe uses that enhance learning, and "automation" for uses that produce work with minimal effort. We found that 61 percent of the students who use AI employ these tools for augmentation purposes, while 42 percent use them for automation tasks like writing essays or generating code.

Even when students used AI to automate tasks, they showed judgment. In open-ended responses, students told us that when they did automate work, it was often during crunch periods like exam week, or for low-stakes tasks like formatting bibliographies and drafting routine emails, not as their default approach to completing meaningful coursework.

Of course, Middlebury is a small liberal arts college with a relatively large portion of wealthy students. What about everywhere else? To find out, we analyzed data from other researchers covering over 130 universities across more than 50 countries. The results mirror our Middlebury findings: Globally, students who use AI tend to be more likely to use it to augment their coursework, rather than automate it.

But should we trust what students tell us about how they use AI? An obvious concern with survey data is that students might underreport uses they see as inappropriate, like essay writing, while overreporting legitimate uses like getting explanations. To verify our findings, we compared them with data from AI company Anthropic, which analyzed actual usage patterns from university email addresses of their chatbot, Claude AI.

Anthropic's data shows that "technical explanations" represent a major use, matching our finding that students most often use AI to explain concepts. Similarly, Anthropic found that designing practice questions, editing essays and summarizing materials account for a substantial share of student usage, which aligns with our results.

In other words, our self-reported survey data matches actual AI conversation logs.

Why it matters

As writer and academic Hua Hsu recently noted, "There are no reliable figures for how many American students use A.I., just stories about how everyone is doing it." These stories tend to emphasize extreme examples, like a Columbia student who used AI "to cheat on nearly every assignment."

But these anecdotes can conflate widespread adoption with universal cheating. Our data confirms that AI use is indeed widespread, but students primarily use it to enhance learning, not replace it. This distinction matters: By painting all AI use as cheating, alarmist coverage may normalize academic dishonesty, making responsible students feel naive for following rules when they believe "everyone else is doing it."

Moreover, this distorted picture provides biased information to university administrators, who need accurate data about actual student AI usage patterns to craft effective, evidence-based policies.

What's next

Our findings suggest that extreme policies like blanket bans or unrestricted use carry risks. Prohibitions may disproportionately harm students who benefit most from AI's tutoring functions while creating unfair advantages for rule breakers. But unrestricted use could enable harmful automation practices that may undermine learning.

Instead of one-size-fits-all policies, our findings lead me to believe that institutions should focus on helping students distinguish beneficial AI uses from potentially harmful ones. Unfortunately, research on AI's actual learning impacts remains in its infancy – no studies I'm aware of have systematically tested how different types of AI use affect student learning outcomes, or whether AI impacts might be positive for some students but negative for others.

Until that evidence is available, everyone interested in how this technology is changing education must use their best judgment to determine how AI can foster learning.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

Germán Reyes is an assistant professor of economics at Middlebury College.

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TECH REVIEW

Dangbei N2 Mini projector is small, yet mighty

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I've reviewed more than a few projectors over the years. Some are made for meetings in a conference room, and some are made for watching movies in your home theater room. Some are made very small for carrying around in a travel bag, and some are quite large.

Some are expensive and some are more affordable.

Today we are looking at a very affordable projector from Dangbei called the **N2 Mini** ($199, us.dangbei.com).

What surprised me about the N2 Mini was the low price, especially as it relates to the built-in features.

First, let's talk about where you'd want to use this projector.

The N2 Mini will not replace your main TV or be the focal point of your home theater room.

A large part of picking out a projector has to do with how bright the picture is on the wall, especially in situations where the room has a lot of windows.

When you choose a TV for your living room, you don't have to worry about the picture being washed out when watching during the day in a bright room.

Projector shopping is different. Since the light has to travel from the projector to the screen, the brightness of the image the projector can throw is a big deal.

The N2 Mini has a brightness rating of 200 ISO lumens, which is not extremely bright.

For reference, the best Dangbei DBOX02 Pro home theater projector can output 2,000 ISO lumens.

Remember, different projectors for different uses. The N2 Mini is a sub-$200 projector and the DBOX02 Pro lists for $1,599.

This means you will want to use the N2 Mini in a darkened room to look its best.

The N2 Mini is also very small and it has a fantastic gimbal stand that tilts and rotates to make projecting at almost any angle quite simple.

The gimbal makes it a perfect projector to put on your nightstand to project on a bedroom wall or even the ceiling. Watching videos while laying in bed is very underrated.

The N2 Mini is quick to set up and use.

The video resolution is 1080P (1,920 x 1,080 pixels).

It has built-in Wi-Fi and comes pre-installed with officially licensed streaming apps like Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube. There is also an app store where you can add other streaming sources, but not all services are available, so you may need to add your own Roku or FireTV or Apple TV if you find your favorite streaming service is not available.

Dangbei / TNS
The Dangbei N2 Mini projector.

It has an HDMI port so you can connect it to your computer or a set top box or streaming box. It also has a USB port so you can watch content from a flash drive.

You can also wirelessly cast video from your phone or computer.

The image size ranges from 40 inches up to 120 inches.

Just so you know, to make the image larger, you move the projector farther away from the screen or wall, but that also drops the brightness. It's a give and take. To get a nice looking image at 120 inches, you'll need a really dark room. Dangbei says 100 inches is the sweet spot.

The projector does a great job in adjusting the picture with auto focus, auto keystone adjustment, intelligent screen fit and obstacle avoidance.

These settings will square up the video image and even move it over if the projector senses something on the wall or in the way when you project.

There are also manual ways to make these adjustments. I found the auto focus a bit soft, so I usually had to tap the adjustment buttons on the remote to fine tune the focus to my eye.

There' s a built-in 6 watt speaker with Dolby audio that is fine for watching movies or YouTube videos, but you won't be blown away by the sound quality. Luckily there is a headphone jack to physically connect external speakers. The N2 Mini also has Bluetooth to connect to external speakers wirelessly.

The fully sealed LED light source keeps dust away and will never need replacing.

The N2 Mini could replace a bedroom TV or would work well for an outdoor movie night. The gimbal makes all the difference in how easy it is to set up and start watching.

If you'd like to dip your toe into the world of projectors, the Dangbei N2 Mini is the perfect combination of sharp image, ease of setup and low price.

Would you like to try iOS 26 early?

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Did you know you can download and install the new iOS 26 ahead of this fall's launch, if your phone can handle it?

Apple traditionally announces the new versions of their operating systems during their annual Worldwide Developer Conference each June and then releases them right around the time the new iPhones go on sale in September.

Members of Apple's developer community could get their hands on the software early to help Apple find bugs, but 10 years ago Apple started releasing the beta software to the public as well.

What is beta software? It is an early release of the software that runs the phone.

I used to be leery of the beta releases after a bad experience early on in the public beta program. Beta software is released with the knowledge the people using it will be diligent in reporting any issues they find so the developer can fix them before the public release.

Once you install the beta software, you'll notice Apple releases an updated version every week or two. These updates include the fixes for problems that were identified earlier by developers and public users.

Each intermediate release should result in fewer and fewer problems. The releases include notes outlining the fixes. New features are also introduced in the intermediate releases and sometimes you can see changes visually as Apple tweaks the interface.

One of the new features of iOS 26 is called Liquid Glass, which is a redesign of the icons and folders on the iPhone's main screen. As the beta releases have gone out, you can see how Apple is playing with the look of the icons, especially with the reflections and transparency.

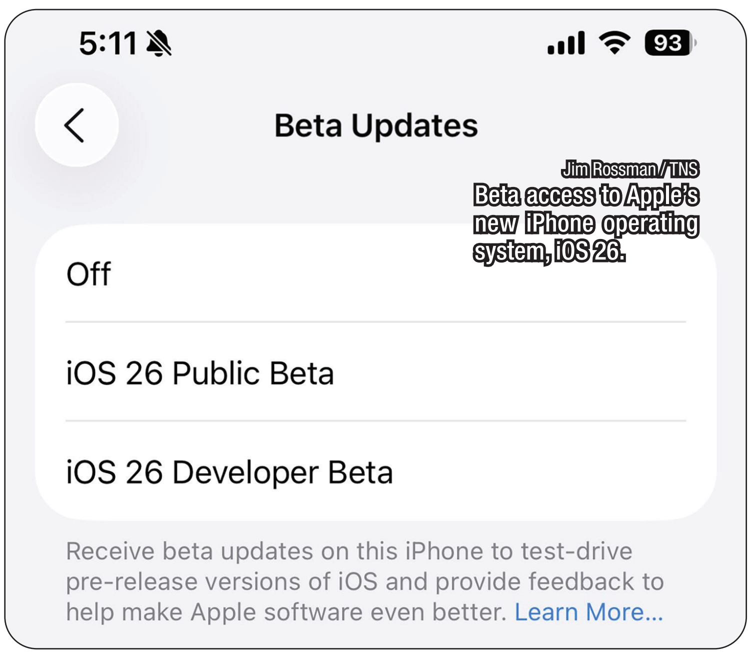
I've been using the iOS 26 beta for about a month, and I've had no issues at all on an iPhone 16e.

If you'd like to try it out on your iPhone, you can go to Settings, then open General and then open Software Update. You'll see a menu there to install the beta. You should make sure you have a current backup of your data, either on iCloud or on your computer. The install takes a few minutes, and all your apps and data should be ready to go when it's finished installing.

Note, you'll need a relatively recent iPhone to install iOS 26. Compatible phones include the iPhone SE (second generation) and any iPhone 11 or newer model.

Be warned, though, if you don't like the beta, going back to the old version of iOS is not very easy. You'd need to wipe your phone and reinstall it.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.



Beta Updates

Off

iOS 26 Public Beta

iOS 26 Developer Beta

Receive beta updates on this iPhone to test-drive pre-release versions of iOS and provide feedback to help make Apple software even better. Learn More...

Jim Rossman / TNS
Beta access to Apple's new iPhone operating system, iOS 26.

Cultivating for color

By CLAIRE THERESE HEMINGWAY
University of Tennessee
(The Conversation)

People often prioritize aesthetics when choosing plants for their gardens. They may pick flowers based on colors that create visually appealing combinations and varieties that have bigger and brighter displays or more fragrant and pleasant-smelling flowers. Some may also choose species that bloom at different times in order to maintain a colorful display throughout the growing season.

Many gardeners also strive for ecological harmony, seeking to maintain pollinator-friendly gardens that support bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators. But there are some notable ways in which the preferences of humans and pollinators have the potential to diverge, with negative consequences for pollinators.

As a cognitive ecologist who studies animal decision-making, I find that understanding how pollinators learn about and choose between flowers can add a helpful perspective to garden aesthetics.

Pollinator preferences and rewards

Over millions of years, plants have evolved suites of floral traits to attract specific types of pollinators.

Pollinators can be attracted to flowers based on color, pattern, scent and texture. For instance, hummingbirds typically visit bright red and orange flowers with narrow openings and a tubular shape. The striking red cardinal flower is one that is primarily pollinated by hummingbirds, for example.

Bees are often attracted to blue, yellow and white flowers that can be either narrow and tubular or open. Lavender, sage and sunflower plants all bear flowers that attract bee pollinators.

Flowers offer rewards to visiting pollinators. Nectar is a sugar-rich solution that flowers produce to attract pollinators, which use it to meet their energy needs.

Flowers have an ulterior motive for providing this energy source. While drinking the nectar, pollen can get stuck on the pollinator and transferred to the next flower it visits. This process is essential for the plant's reproductive success. Pollen contains the plants' male gametes, which, when deposited onto another flower in the right place, can fertilize the female gametes and produce seeds that grow into new plants. Pollen is also nutrient-rich, containing proteins, lipids and amino acids. Many species, such as bees, collect pollen to feed their developing young.

A battle for resources

Pollinators visit flowers in search of floral rewards. But modifying the features of flowers for aesthetics can be a hindrance to pollinators trying to get these rewards. For example, popular garden plants such as roses and peonies are often bred to have more petals and larger flower heads, making them more visually striking and appealing to humans. But these extra petals may block a pollinator's access to the center of the flower, where floral rewards are located.

Further, plants have limited resources. Spending them on building aesthetically pleasing but energetically expensive features can mean there's less left to invest in signals and rewards essential for attracting pollinators. In extreme cases, breeding for aesthetics has led to plants with what scientists and gardeners call "double flowers." In these varieties, extra petals replace reproductive parts entirely. These plants are often altogether unrewarding for pollinators, since the flowers no longer produce nectar or pollen. Double flowers occur from mutations that convert the pollen-producing stamens and other reproductive organs into petals. They can occur naturally but are rare in wild populations.

Since these double flowers cannot spread pollen or produce seeds effectively, they are unable to reproduce in the wild and pass these mutations on. To cultivate them as garden varieties, people propagate these plants through cuttings – small sections cut from the stem that can be rooted to grow clones of the parent plant. Many common garden plants have popular double-flowered varieties, including roses, peonies, camellias, marigolds, tulips, dahlias and chrysanthemums.

Roses, for example, have become synonymous with having many densely-packed petals. But these popular garden varieties are usually double-flowered or have many extra petals blocking access to the center of the rose and provide no rewards to pollinators.

Consider making your gardens friendlier to pollinators by avoiding these double-flowered plants, and ask your local garden center for recommended varieties if you need help.

Sometimes gardeners intentionally prevent plants from flowering, which limits or eliminates their value to pollinators.

For example, herbs such as thyme, oregano, mint and basil are generally most flavorful and tender before the plant begins to flower. Once it flowers, the plant diverts energy to reproductive structures, and leaves become tougher and lose flavor. As a result, gardeners often pinch off flower buds and harvest leaves frequently to promote continued growth and delay flowering. Letting some of your herbs flower occasionally can help pollinators without affecting your kitchen supplies too much.

Finding the right flowers

Flowers with unusual colors and stronger fragrances can be difficult for pollinators to detect and recognize.

People might favor bright and unusual flower colors in their gardens over naturally occurring shades. But this preference might not align with what the pollinators have evolved to favor in nature. For example, planting human-preferred colors, such as white or pink morphs of hummingbird-pollinated flowers that are typically red, can reduce a flower's visibility and attractiveness. Even when cultivated varieties have a similar enough color to natural ones to attract pollinators, they may lack other important visual components, such as ultraviolet floral patterns that can guide pollinators to nectar sources.

Breeding plant varieties to accentuate particular aesthetic traits may have unintended consequences for other traits. Changes in flower color through selective breeding can also affect leaf color, as genes involved in pigment production can affect multiple plant tissues. Besides changing the overall appearance of the plant, changing leaf color may alter background contrast between flowers and the leaves, which can make flowers less conspicuous to pollinators.

Many pollinators use a combination of color and scent to detect and discriminate between flowers. But breeding for traits such as color and brightness can alter floral scents due to unintended genetic changes or energetic trade-offs.

Scent helps pollinators locate flowers from farther distances, so unfamiliar or reduced fragrance may make flowers harder to find in the first place. Disruption in either color or scent can make flowers less noticeable to pollinators expecting a familiar pairing and can hinder a pollinator's ability to learn which flowers are suitable for them in the first place.

A balanced approach for healthy gardens

When flowers are harder to find, pollinators are less likely to visit them. When they offer poor or no rewards, pollinators quickly abandon them for better options. This disruption in plant-pollinator interactions has implications not only for pollinator health but also for garden vitality. Many plants rely on animal pollinators to reproduce and make mature seeds. These are either collected by gardeners or allowed to drop to the ground and sprout on their own to grow new flowering plants the following year.

When selecting plants for a garden, gardeners who want to support pollinators might consider choosing native varieties that have evolved alongside local pollinators.

In most areas of the country, there are native plants with colorful and interesting flowers that bloom at different times, from early spring to late fall. These plants tend to produce reliable floral signals and offer the nectar and pollen needed to support pollinator nutrition and development.

Sterile varieties and double flowers offer little or no rewards for pollinators, and gardens with them may not attract as many pollinators. Letting herbs flower after some harvesting is another simple way to support beneficial insects.

With choices informed by not just your aesthetic preferences but also those of pollinators, you can create colorful gardens that support wildlife and stay in bloom across various seasons.

Claire Therese Hemingway is assistant professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at the University of Tennessee.

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Mekal Best via Unsplash

Chaos gardening – wild beauty, or just a mess?

By DERYN DAVIDSON
Colorado State University
(The Conversation)

If you've spent any time in the gardening corners of social media lately, you've likely come across a trend called "chaos gardening."

The name alone is eye-catching – equal parts fun, rebellious and slightly alarming. Picture someone tossing random seeds into bare soil, watering once or twice, and ending up with a backyard jungle of blooms. No rows, no color coordination, no spacing charts. Just sprinkle and hope for the best.

As a sustainable landscape specialist at Colorado State University Extension, I think a lot about how to help people make designed landscapes more sustainable. Occasionally, a new trend like this one crops up claiming to be the silver bullet of gardening – supposedly it saves water, saves the bees and requires no maintenance.

But what is chaos gardening, really? And does it work? As with most viral trends, the answer is: sometimes.

What chaos gardening is and isn't

At its core, chaos gardening is the practice of mixing a wide variety of seeds, often including leftover packets, wildflower mixes, or cut flower favorites, and scattering them over a planting area with minimal planning.

The goal is to create a dense, colorful garden that surprises you with its variety. For many, it's a low-pressure, joyful way to experiment.

But chaos gardening isn't the same as ecological restoration, pollinator meadow planting or native prairie establishment. Unlike chaos gardening, all of these techniques rely on careful species selection, site prep and long-term management.

Chaos gardening is a bit like making soup from everything in your pantry – it might be delicious, but there are no guarantees.

Chaos gardening's appeal

One reason chaos gardening may be catching on is because it sidesteps the rules of garden design. A traditional landscape design approach is effective and appropriate for many settings, but it is a time investment and can feel intimidating. Design elements and principles, and matching color schemes, don't fit everyone's style or skill set.

Even the apparently relaxed layers of blooms and informal charm of an English cottage garden actually result from careful planning. Chaos gardening, by contrast, lets go of control. It offers a playful, forgiving entry point into growing things. In a way, chaos gardening is an antidote to the pressure of perfection, especially the kind found in highly curated, formal landscapes.

There's also the allure of ease. People want gardening to be simple. If chaos gardening brings more people into the joy and mess of growing things, I consider that a win in itself. Broader research has found that emotional connection and accessibility are major motivators for gardening, often more than environmental impact.

When does chaos gardening work?

The best outcomes from chaos gardening happen when the chaos has a few guardrails:

- Choose plants with similar needs. Most successful chaos gardens rely on sun-loving annuals that grow quickly and bloom prolifically, like zinnias, cosmos, marigolds, snapdragons and sunflowers. These are also excellent cut flowers to use in bouquets, which makes them doubly rewarding.
- Consider your region. A chaos garden that thrives in Colorado might flop in North Carolina. It is beneficial to select seed mixes or individual varieties suited to your area since factors like soil type and growing season length matter. Different plants have unique needs beyond just sun and water; soil pH, cold hardiness and other conditions can make a big difference.
- Think about pollinators. Mixing in nectar- and pollen-rich flowers native to North America, such as black-eyed Susans, bee balm or coneflowers, provides valuable resources for native bees, butterflies, moths and other local pollinators. These species benefit even more if you plan your garden with phenology – that is, nature's calendar – in mind. By maintaining blooms from early spring through late fall, you ensure a steady food supply throughout the growing season. Plus, a diverse plant palette supports greater pollinator abundance and diversity.
- Prep your site. Even "chaos" needs a little order. Removing weeds, loosening the top layer of soil and watering regularly, especially during germination when seeds are sprouting, will dramatically improve your results. Successful seed germination requires direct seed-to-soil contact and consistent moisture; if seeds begin to grow and then dry out, many species will not survive.

When does chaos gardening not work?

There are a few key pitfalls to chaos gardening that often get left out of the online hype:

- Wrong plant, wrong place. If your mix includes shade-loving plants and your garden is in full sun, or drought-tolerant plants whose seeds end up in a soggy low spot, they'll struggle to grow.
- Invasive species and misidentified natives. Some wildflower mixes, especially inexpensive or mass-market ones, claim to be native but actually contain non-native species that can spread beyond your garden and become invasive. While many non-natives are harmless, some spread quickly and disrupt natural ecosystems. Check seed labels carefully and choose regionally appropriate native or adapted species whenever possible.
- Soil, sun and water still matter. Gardening is always a dialogue with place. Even if you're embracing chaos, taking notes, observing how light moves through your space, and understanding your soil type will help you know your site better, and choose appropriate plants.
- Maintenance is still a thing. Despite the "toss and walk away" aesthetic, chaos gardens still require care. Watering, weeding and eventually cutting back or removing spent annuals are all part of the cycle.

Beyond the hashtag

Beneath the chaos gardening memes, there's something real happening: a growing interest in a freer, more intuitive way of gardening. And that's worth paying attention to.

Once someone has success with a zinnia or cosmos, they may be inspired to try more gardening. They might start noticing which flowers the bees are visiting in their garden. They may discover native plants and pay attention to the soil they are tending, seeing how both are part of a larger, living system. A chaotic beginning can become something deeper.

Chaos gardening might not replace the structured borders of a manicured garden or a carefully curated pollinator patch, but it might get someone new into the garden. It might lower the stakes, invite experimentation and help people see beauty in abundance rather than control.

If that's the entry point someone needs, then let the chaos begin.

Deryn Davidson is a specialist in sustainable landscapes at Colorado State University Extension.

TRAVEL

A whale near Husavik, Iceland.
Tatonka / Dreamstime / TNS

Iceland's latest destination updates include new hotels, wellness experiences, and tours

By MIA TAYLOR
TravelPulse (TNS)

A perpetually popular destination in recent years, Iceland is well-known for its glaciers and geothermal lagoons.

But the country has far more to offer travelers, and Visit Iceland just released a slate of interesting destination news, covering everything from new wellness retreats and hotel openings to wildlife adventures and museum exhibits

Here are some of the highlights (Read: additional reasons to put an Iceland trip on your to-do list).

Wellness offerings

Laugarás Lagoon

Set to open in September 2025, Laugarás Lagoon is the latest addition to The Golden Circle, Iceland's famous tourism route.

The lagoon is a two-level luxury retreat offering relaxation set against Iceland's stunning natural landscape. There's a variety of bathing experiences available on-site, including a cascading waterfall. Or for a more tranquil setting, a grotto is tucked into the corner of the lagoon. The two forest saunas, offering health benefits and views over the Hvíta River and its surroundings, are another not-to-miss feature.

Ylja Restaurant will be a signature dining experience curated by renowned Icelandic chef Gísli Matt, highlighting seasonal and locally sourced ingredients.

Laugarvatn Fontana Geothermal Baths

The Fontana Spa in Laugarvatn was founded in 1929, but a recent refurbishment has enhanced the experience with contemporary comforts. Located on the Golden Circle route, the baths offer an opportunity to slow down and enjoy the serenity of the landscape.

Guests are invited to soak in natural pools, bubbling hot springs, and a lake that stretches as far as the eye can see. A particular highlight is the region's geothermal bread, which uses a traditional recipe and is baked in the hot ground.

Sky Lagoon

Sky Lagoon, Reykjavík's oceanfront geothermal lagoon, has taken its seven-step Skjól wellness ritual to the next level. The property's recent expansion offers a transformative wellness journey with a second sauna that features Iceland's largest single-pane glass window, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Attila Tatár / Dreamstime / TNS

The Skogafoss waterfall of Iceland.

Visitors finish their ritual with a shot of antioxidant-rich crowberry juice, for a healthy taste of the local landscape.

Hotel openings and refurbishments

Höfi Lodge

Höfi Lodge is a luxury adventure lodge in northern Iceland, located just 25 minutes from Akureyri. The property offers 40 rooms with spectacular views of Eyjafjörur, one of the longest fjords in Iceland. On-site facilities include a restaurant, rooftop bar, spa, and a gym.

Further afield, guests can also enjoy activities such as heliskiing, whale watching, hiking, and horse riding, with the lodge also offering customizable tour packages and transportation options, including a 10-minute helicopter transfer from Akureyri Airport.

Hotel Akureyri

Hotel Akureyri is a charming micro-hotel located in the heart of the city of the same name.

With a four-story extension added in summer 2024 – including a new lobby, bar, lounge, and 52 rooms – the boutique bolthole offers modern comforts, top-of-the-range facilities, personalized experiences and excellent value.

Hotel Akureyri is also home to the popular North restaurant, which focuses on sustainable, local ingredients sourced from the region.

Skáld Hotel

Opening in summer 2025 as part of Hilton's Curio Collection, the Skáld Hotel will be the first internationally branded countryside property in North Iceland, bringing elevated luxury to the heart of Akureyri.

Designed to emphasize Iceland's history and culture, the 70-room hotel will offer a base for a tranquil escape amid the region's natural beauty. The property's serene fjord-side setting and intimate scale promise a restorative retreat for travelers to the north.

New accommodations

Heiin Houses

Heiin is a new accommodation option just outside Akureyri in North Iceland, offering modern, well-designed houses in the peaceful surroundings of Valaheii.

Each 125-square-meter house has four bedrooms and sleeps up to eight guests, making them ideal for families, groups, or anyone seeking a quiet stay with fjord views but needing the convenience of being a six-minute drive from Akureyri.

Currently, five houses are available, with two more opening by the end of July. Openings will continually periodically through until 2026, where once finished – twelve houses will be available. Bookings can be made via the Heiin website, Airbnb, and Booking.com.

New tours and attractions

Whale watching

The family-run business Friends of Moby Dick now offers whale watching tours in Húsavík, a vibrant town on the northeast coast of Iceland.

Boats are equipped with the latest technology and safety equipment, and passionate guides are on hand to share their knowledge and love of the whales in Skjálfandi Bay. Gentle Giants, North Sailing, and Húsavík Adventures also offer tours to the protected Skjálfandi Bay.

Heli-rafting

Arctic Rafting recently launched its first heli-rafting tour on the Markarfljót River in collaboration with Asgard Beyond. Adrenaline seekers take a scenic helicopter ride up the Markarfljót canyon, which was carved out by glacier water and is up to a staggering 160 meters deep in parts.

The helicopter then lands inside the canyon, where participants start their epic journey on the river to the infamous Eyjafjallajökull volcano, past glaciers, waterfalls, and basalt columns. This is a sightseeing adventure like no other.

Water safaris

Ribsafari in Vestmannaeyjar offers tours of the puffin colonies on Elliaey and Bjarnaey, where visitors can observe the impressive seabirds in their natural habitat.

The tour also visits Heimaey, Vestmannaeyjar's only inhabited island, and the lava fields created by the 1973 volcanic eruption. A particular highlight is the stop at a sea cave, where guests can experience the unique acoustics with music. Local guides offer insight into the islands' history, volcanic activity, and wildlife for a fun yet informative adventure.

TRAVEL TIPS

New eGates at U.S. airports promise faster screening under Trump's 'vision'

As part of efforts to "deliver on President Trump's vision" for travel security in the United States, several airports will soon introduce new technology to verify passenger information.

In an announcement, the Transportation Security Administration said the change is intended to "enhance traveler experience."

For now, only a handful of airports will incorporate the technology, which stems from a new TSA public-private partnership, according to the agency.

Electronic gates

TSA checkpoints are beginning to incorporate new electronic gates to help expedite identity verification at select airports.

"The eGates allow TSA to automatically compare traveler biometrics with their identity document and boarding pass without the need for a human operator, enhancing efficiency and security. CLEAR, a private company operating under TSA's Registered Traveler Program, is piloting these specific eGates in coordination with TSA at no cost to U.S. taxpayers," the agency said.

The pilot program is being carried out by CLEAR in coordination with the agency. According to TSA, the initiative does not involve cost to U.S. taxpayers.

TSA Acting Deputy Administrator Adam Stahl said: "eGates accomplish several objectives toward achieving Secretary Noem's goal to enhance TSA security and hospitality." Kristi Noem is U.S. secretary of Homeland Security.

"This includes creating a seamless, less invasive traveler experience and shorter wait times at TSA security checkpoints. We look forward to rolling out additional eGate systems as we work to implement President Trump's vision for a new Golden Age of American Travel," Stahl added.

Which U.S. airports will feature eGates?

The CLEAR eGates made their debut at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

According to TSA, the technology is also expected to be installed later in August at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

How they work

According to FOX, the new system in Atlanta is currently available to members enrolled in the CLEAR+ pilot program, who can use dedicated CLEAR lanes at certain TSA checkpoints to bypass traditional processes.

The eGates use biometric software to compare a traveler's face with their identity document and boarding pass. Once the traveler's identity and authorization are confirmed, they move directly to the physical screening stage without interacting with TSA staff.

The technology arrives as the U.S. anticipates a surge in international travel, with millions of visitors expected for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

However, the eGates won't be available to everyone. CLEAR+ membership costs $209 per year per traveler, although the company also offers discounted family plans.

Other changes in the 'Golden Age' of travel

Another policy celebrated by the Trump administration as part of the so-called "Golden Age of American Travel" is the end of the TSA shoe-removal requirement for domestic flights, a measure in place for nearly 20 years.

Recently, TSA clarified that passengers may still be asked to remove their shoes if an alarm is triggered during screening.

In July, TSA also highlighted Trump administration policies aimed at eliminating redundant passenger checks for international flights.

That program is in its early stages and currently involves only major U.S. airlines American Airlines and Delta, which partnered with TSA to pilot the new protocol from London's Heathrow International Airport.

By Maykel Gonzalez / Miami Herald (TNS)

Photos by Benjamin Myers / TNS

Sunset rituals can be found in the private cove at Caille Blanc Villa & Hotel.

How to really relax in St. Lucia?
Align with the island's time

By MARLISE KAST-MYERS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Despite our addiction to travel, we seldom use the word "vacation." My husband Benjamin and I hit the ground running, maximizing experiences in front of us, even if we leave more exhausted than when we arrived. Life is short, aspirations are long, and budget is somewhere in between.

We avoid visiting the same place twice, knowing that our bucket list still has some unchecked boxes. Ironically, island escapes are not at the top of it. We're like tropical Scrooges-of-the-sea, choosing surfing over sunning, knowing there's only so long we can lie in the sand without the fear of blistering rays or death by coconut.

I thought of all this on our way to St. Lucia, an island between Martinique and St. Vincent. Other than a visit to Puerto Rico, neither of us had been to the Eastern Caribbean archipelago. Timing, budget and desire had somehow aligned with five days to pause in paradise. Peeling back the foil on his airplane meal, Benjamin leaned over to see if I had made the wiser choice.

I hadn't.

Victoriously twirling his pasta, he asked, "What are we going to do there?"

Pushing away my untouched tray, I closed my eyes. "Sleep. That's what we're going to do. Sleep."

Unlike most getaways, this trip to the West Indies had little on the itinerary other than rest and recuperation. With full-time jobs and a hobby-turned-business, we were tired. Twenty hours of travel and a red-eye flight didn't help.

Once on land, we immediately went into "us mode," asking our driver all sorts of questions, subconsciously turning the taxi into a textbook. During the 45-minute drive, we learned how the international airport was built and used by the U.S. Air Force during World War II to protect the Caribbean. We heard how St. Lucia changed hands 14 times, slipping through the fingers of the French and British until finally becoming a sovereign nation in 1979.

I was slightly older than St. Lucia, meaning we could potentially be friends. Unlike me, St. Lucia was not showing her age. She was full of youth and color as we skirted mountains and beaches on our way to the southwest side of the island. Perched on hillsides were tin-roof homes painted turquoise, coral and sunshine yellow. In the horizon were banana plantations, palm-fringed beaches and slopeside towns where hibiscus and bougainvillea grew like weeds.

Framing the narrow shoulder were fallen mangos, crushed beneath our tires like rich-man's litter. The air smelled of sea salt, cinnamon and tropical fruit, as if God had spilled sunscreen from the heavens during application. In the background was the faint sound of steel drums, making me wonder if we were entering Carnival or if St. Lucia constantly moved to the rhythm of reggae and calypso.

Rolling down his window, our driver slowed to greet friends with a fist bump and tap of his heart. Although English was the official language, our driver – and many locals – spoke Creole (Kwéyòl) with one another, a French-based vernacular he claimed was endangered due to the next generation's obsession with social media.

That made me sad, as did his comment about bustling towns and sugar farms colonized by the French, and African slaves who had kept them running. But with abolition in 1834, and independence 145 years later, a freedom and culture were awakened, so rich you could taste it.

And, at Rabot Estate, we did.

As the oldest cacao farm on the island, the 140-acre plantation was purchased in 2006 by British luxury chocolate brand Hotel Chocolat. Behind the vision were U.K. entrepreneurs, Angus Thirlwell and Peter Harris who bridged the gap between growing cacao and making artisanal chocolate.

In less than three years, the semi-abandoned farm turned into a revival of St. Lucia's cacao industry that now supports more than 50 island growers. From seedling to roasting, sustainable farming methods have helped transform an initiative into an empire of chocolate shops, a boutique hotel, a restaurant, a spa, and a cacao farm with immersive tours. Headquarters for the crop were right outside our door at Rabot Estate.

For now, we would just eat the harvest at the hotel's restaurant. A far (and good) cry from Hershey's, nearly every dish was delicately infused with cacao. From tangy pulp to roasted nibs, every part of the pod was integrated into the traditional menu featuring saltfish, callaloo soup and stewed meats with tropical fruits and island spices. From farm to fork were eggs, coffee, herbs, honey, vinegar and ricotta. Cacao-braised pork, tuna tartar drizzled with cacao oil, white-chocolate mash, cacao nib rice, grilled fish with cacao butter – it was like Willy Wonka and Gordon Ramsay were locked in the kitchen and turning out magic.

Apparently New Yorkers fly in by private jet just for dinner. Luckily for us, our commute was steps away to bungalow No. 5. They hooked us with "adults-only" and reeled us in with open-air rainforest suites overlooking the Piton mountains.

We've had our fair share of rooms with a view, but nothing quite like this. Rising dramatically from the sea, St. Lucia's twin volcanic peaks powerfully created one of the most iconic landscapes in the Caribbean.

They didn't seem real, but some 12 hours later, they were the dreamiest view I could wake up to. Rested and back on physical track, we started with a morning hike, only to find out that halfway in, humidity would pivot us toward the pool. "Island time" was eminently real, where people were relaxed, pace was slow and no one wore a watch.

Taxis "minutes away" would leave us drawing faces in the sand for hours. Tours were delayed, reservations would go missing, but "Ya Mon," life was good ... and so was the rum ... and cacao gin, and salted-caramel vodka, and chocolate velvetised cream. They had it all at Rabot Estate's Project Chocolat, during the "Tree to Bar" experience.

Our farm tour through the rainforest concluded with liquor tasting and handcrafting our own chocolate bar. With a mortar and pestle, we ground nibs, sugar and cocoa butter into a paste, muscling our way to a 65 percent organic chocolate bar that never made it past midnight.

Mine was good; Benjamin's was better.

At sunset, we walked the estate's jungle trail through a cacao grove around Rabot Lake. Lizards scampered up bamboo, dragonflies kissed the water, and hummingbirds darted from pod to petal. Along the boardwalk we stopped to smell the limes, coffee, cashews and bananas. I felt alive, doing parkour off of boulders, swinging from branches and singing until I tangled the lyrics.

Travel does that. It brings out the best me when priorities, productivity and profession are faded by the culture in front of me.

"You live your life in these sunny little experiences," my husband said, "and I get to watch them rise and set every day."

It seemed that sun was setting a little later in St. Lucia, as we slowly discovered our own rhythm. Despite the fact our hotel had ocean views, we had yet to touch the Caribbean Sea. A 10-minute drive took us to Malgretoute Beach for margaritas and roti – a traditional flatbread filled with curry stew.

The soft brown sand reminded me of beaches back home in San Diego; but, as we soon discovered, not all beaches are created equal. Some had black sand, others had white, and several strands – including the island's most pristine, Sugar Beach – imported the powdery perfection to the island.

For us, none of that mattered. The coastline became an aesthetic backdrop rather than a tactile activity. Such was the case at Caille Blanc Villa Hotel, a 15-minute drive up the coast near the village of Soufrière.

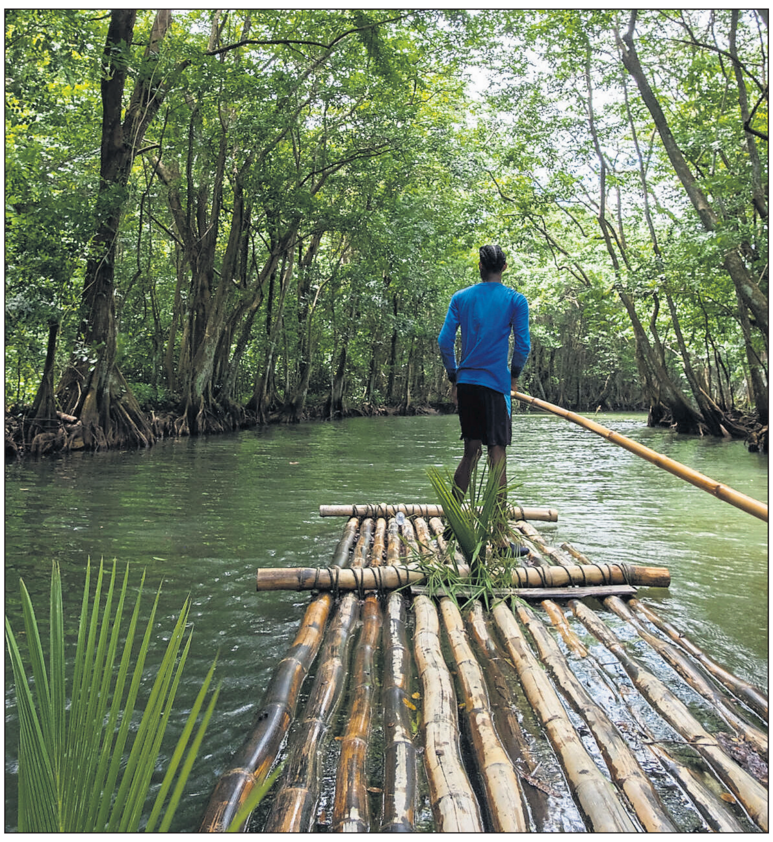
For the second leg of our trip, we went big, opting for a suite at the six-bedroom boutique hotel.

Beyond the fountain courtyard was a 65-foot infinity pool and waterfall overlooking the Pitons and sea. Hand-carved wooden doors unveiled massive rooms with Balinese-meets-safari décor complete with four-poster beds draped in linen. Palm-leaf ceiling fans twirled overhead while our butler accordion-folded back an entire "wall" facing the ocean.

Nothing stood between us and the view, as every barrier was removed that blocked us from nature. Hidden beneath our cliff-side room was a staircase that led to a private snorkeling cove.

Purple sea fans waved beneath the surface while iridescent Blue Chromis looked fit for a rave.

We floated above the reef, mesmerized by the crackling and snapping sound that took me back to my childhood when Pop Rocks served as currency between classmates. That jungle trail to the cove became our sunset ritual, tugging on Tarzan vines and sharing tales of underwater adventures.



Glide under rainforest canopies during the bamboo rafting experience on the Roseau River.

We thought the snorkeling was good until the following morning when it was great. Just offshore at Anse Chastanet Beach were shallow reefs where Needlefish looked ready to fix a button and Trumpetfish were on their way to craft as pipe cleaners. Circling brain coral were all types of neon fish – sergeant major, parrot, squirrel, angel and butterfly – all reminiscent of Dr. Seuss book escapees.

Our aqua day was just getting started. From there, we went to Sulphur Springs, the world's only drive-in volcano, where we soaked in mud baths known to detoxify the body and cure everything from eczema to arthritis. We painted our bodies like warriors, letting the mud dry and crack on our skin like sourdough crust. Nearby, we deep rinsed at Toraille Waterfall cascading 50-feet onto our shoulders and backs.

The massage-by-nature seamlessly took us to a place of calm, grabbing sugarcane sticks on our walk back to town, gnawing on the fibrous stalks while recognizing honks as greetings rather than road rage. These were the small things that pushed reset on our souls. Well, that, and the al fresco lunch at Mango Tree Restaurant.

Perched on the bluff at Stonefield Villa Resort, the award-winning restaurant served Creole dishes like fried fish with coconut rice and beef pepperpot stew with green-fig mash. We toasted to nothing in particular and slept to live another day.

Oddly enough, we napped ... a lot. As non-nappers, we couldn't get enough of the inside of our eyelids. The sound of steel drums made their way from our dreams onto our terrace, as live music was on deck right outside our door. We swam at sunset, ate dinner at dark, and danced at midnight.

It was almost too perfect, and even more so during our bamboo rafting experience on the Roseau River. For two miles, we glided under rainforest canopies, sipping from fresh coconuts while iguanas sunbathed in branches.

Our guide explained how St. Lucia was once called "Ioüanalao" by the Arawak Indians, and later "Hewanorra," by the Caribs, both meaning "where the iguana is found." In the late 16th century, the island was officially named St. Lucia in honor of the Christian martyr, St. Lucy of Syracuse – making it the only sovereign state in the world named after a woman. There was certainly beauty behind it all.

Stabbing the muck with his bamboo pole, our guide pushed us from the narrow canals toward the open sea. Like claws to the earth, mangrove roots arched their way into the marsh, thirsty for the nutrients St. Lucia had to offer.

That sustenance was found on a private bay where our rafting experience ended with a beachside lunch. We swam in the ocean, grading one another on our aqua-gymnastics, with my handstand earning a perfect 10 due to my toe point. A pitter-patter of rain turned into a full-blown storm.

We didn't care, but our chef did. Motioning us toward shore, he was ready for shelter. Of course I had to ask how such an idyllic, perfect place could be deserted, with no one there but us.

"This is every day" he told me, "and everywhere."

With less than 185,000 residents on an island stretching 27 miles long, perhaps there was plenty of space to live life fully, to walk the powdery sands that cradled the Caribbean, to embrace a culture that values the wisdom of its elders, to drive into volcanoes, plunge into children's books and climb natural wonders.

To stop and smell the cacao, to ignore the clock and live by the sun, to fist-bump your neighbor and tap your heart in gratitude, to dance under waterfalls and swim in the rain, to change hands 14 times and still declare your independence; to cling to your roots, and above all, to rise and set a little later because you've discovered your own island time.

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